

# Plots and Plotting      A Monograph

## Brief History of Allotments in Sheffield

### Inditement

It is quite clear to anyone who takes an interest in Sheffield's allotments that all is not well. This is highlighted by comparisons with other towns and cities.

As a service to the people of Sheffield, allotment provision has been a basket case for decades. Now that the popularity of allotments has risen, the long-term problems with the service have been exacerbated and resulted in a complete crisis.

There are approximately 1000 empty and untenanted allotments.  
There must be at least 1000 people on the waiting list.  
There is demand and there is supply but the two don't match.

One person has effectively held and wielded excessive power over another 2000 lives without scrutiny or accountability.

Recent events have brought the situation to a head, but a brief historical review shows that negative patterns have characterised the whole term of office.

Over the years, this officer has picked fights with many influential figures, which has been detrimental to allotments as a whole.

- o Tried to forbid the leader of the City Council in the 1990's from growing strawberries.
- o Chopped down fruit trees on the plot of a head of the Planning Department.
- o Poisoned plants on a plot rented by a leading figure in the community sector.

One result of these confrontations is that allotment provision as a whole has lost out. By consistently showing contempt for individuals who had some thing to contribute to allotments, much potential goodwill has been squandered.

Nobody wants to think of themselves as victims of these petty persecutions. Every case where someone articulate and competent has been harassed creates complicity in subsequent crimes. If all the cases where bullying has happened knew about each other and acted together, there would be immediate justification for the officer's suspension and dismissal.

## **How to corrupt the system**

Established departmental practice has been to aggressively deny any complaints and even accuse the complainant to pretend they are in the wrong.

Institutional cover-up and hush-up may be what you'd expect from a council as a body, but the cumulative effect is to sanction illegal practices so that they become the norm. There has been a domino effect whereby a minor transgression at a low level is then covered up by the line-manager and even department heads are coerced into defending the infringement by being misinformed.

At the time of the appointment of the current departmental head, the allotments section was renowned for its patriarchal and dictatorial culture. There was a hope that the new boss might address and remedy this. However, she was immediately implicated in the negative culture by signing a mass of eviction notices, many of which were not legally served on tenants. This led to much disruption and grief for community groups and people with mental health needs amongst others.

Several horticultural therapists have concluded that the current system is not safe for their vulnerable clients and even constitutes a threat to their mental health. This means that this sector has been suppressed and is under-represented in Sheffield.

## **How to alienate the community**

Many Organic growers have been picked upon over the years due to the fundamental ignorance of modern horticulture.

However, the whole community suffers as a result of incompetence. Even the most loyal and subservient plot-holders experience the anomalies, such as the builder on Marsh Lane who was flagrantly abusing the regulations by burning plastic and using a plot as a commercial property. Instead of being removed, he was rewarded by being allocated a second plot on the same site.

The effect of the officer's meddling in the lives of local people setting one perceived group against another has created an atmosphere of paranoia and mistrust. Again, this has been exploited by the officer to misrepresent plot-holders as divided and squabbling.

People on the waiting lists have recently been used as cannon fodder to try to remove tenants who are perceived to be a threat to the officer, i.e. anybody who knows too much about the endemic corruption within the department.

## **Consistency**

As any individual interested in Sheffield's allotments will know, official policy has often been self-contradictory. Changes have not been communicated to tenants, who suddenly find that what was permitted one year is then deemed illegal the next.

For instance, after much negotiation with Sheffield Markets amongst others, the sale of produce grown on allotments and sold off-site was sanctioned, because it was economically negligible. Two years later this was officially contradicted.

As ever when it suits these regulations are again flouted by the very authority that should uphold them. An allotmenter who sells commercially recently took part in a BBC feature. After this he could sell his produce "as seen on T.V.!"

## **"Policing Allotments"**

Vandalism has been the biggest external problem for the past 30 years, contributing to the abandonment of whole sites. This has been exacerbated by the break-down of relations between the allotments office and their police liaison, due to abuse of the system.

The police have been misled into pursuing the officer's personal grudges. By wasting police time and resources, allotments as a whole are then not taken seriously.

## **Blame Culture**

The pressure from vandalism has been continually cited as the main reason for the state of allotments and the demoralisation of the allotment community. Equally, but not so openly, the tenants themselves have been blamed, for their poverty and infirmity.

## **Macho Culture**

As a Council Department, Parks has been one of the least open to change and modern working practices. This could be illustrated by the fact that despite its immense land holdings (40,000 acres), Sheffield gets only ¼ of the budget of other metropolitan boroughs.

This has meant that entrenched and embattled cultures have persisted long after they have been addressed and remedied in larger departments such as housing or waste management. There have been attempts to improve and modernise the allotments service, but these have simply been rejected and stymied.

A new head of department was brought in from outside with the specific remit to change the aggressive and confrontational culture which the allotments department has earned a reputation for.

## **P.R.**

In the past year there has been an attempt to cover up the problems. The pretence that the service has been competently delivered is utterly unsustainable and does not stand up to scrutiny.

Anyone can see at a glance that a variety of "rules" have not been effectively applied for many years: -

- Many plots have massive trees growing, which have been there for many decades. Perennials, whether fruiting or ornamental, are present on more than 90 % of plots.
- Hedges are often not kept at a uniform 5 feet, either by tenants or by the council.
- Many permanent structures, built during the last 50 + years exceed the official recommendation in size.

### **Arbitrary application of rules**

Any objective observation of allotment sites will reveal that different rules and standards are applied on different sites.

### **Established practices**

For the past 20 years, tenants were compensated for taking on derelict and untidy plots by being given a year's tenancy rent-free.

The standard explained by the allotment officer was that as long as you pay your rent and cut the external hedge, you would be okay.

### **Practice contradicts policy**

A variety of issues can be identified where stated Council policies have been directly contradicted by practices common in this department.

For instance, the ban on 'any crop which occupies the ground for more than 12 months' is taken from the 1908 Act of Parliament but is directly contradicted by the 1922 Act which permits the cultivation of 'vegetables OR fruit', as advertised on the council's website.

### **Reversals of policy**

Policies have been known to change and then be reversed. For instance selling produce was and is now not permitted. However, for 2 years, 1999-2000, it was allowed.

These self-contradictions are not communicated effectively and many innocent and well-meaning souls then find themselves in breach of the current regulations.

This is especially damaging for community projects, which have responsibilities both to clients with needs and as employers of allotment workers. Projects, which were actively encouraged in the 1990's, have since been abandoned or suppressed.

## **Threat of eviction**

As a new tenant, the first and probably only contact you will have with the department has been a letter informing the tenant that their allotment is in breach of the rules in the tenancy and that they will be evicted if nothing is done about it. Many tenants have been worried because nothing is specified. Recently pictures have accompanied to explain what needs doing. Sometimes these pictures do not relate to the plot referred to.

Eviction is a blunt and highly coercive tool, so the effect of these letters is to alienate tenants and create a permanently bad impression of the landlord.

## **Regressive mentality**

Modern approaches to allotments such as Organics and Permaculture have not been understood. Such practice has been actively rejected and even destroyed.

## **Abuses of Power**

Recent cases should be perceived as an exacerbation of long-term patterns. Over the years, the officer has

## **Condoning illegality**

Faced with an intractable tenant who was terrorising Meersbrook, the officer was reported as recommending that other tenants should "beat 'em up and burn 'em out". The officer himself has been reported as threatening tenants with physical violence.

## **Financial mismanagement**

The department has consistently swallowed up funds, which were meant to be allocated to and run by community groups. Most recently, £60,000 was raised by the Federation, but spent by the department without community involvement.

Other funds have been effectively expropriated from community groups, including £8,000 from Joint funding in 2001.

## **Dividing Communities**

The officer has continuously waged campaigns to try to direct and influence what should be independent democratic processes. He is exploiting allotment tenants' respect for authority by instructing those he sees as "loyal" to undermine those he sees as threats to his own position.

### **Case Studies**

1. The LEAF project have been hosting visits by small groups of children from Chaucer school for more than a year without any problems or

consequences for other plot holders on their site. When Yewlands School wanted to set up the same arrangement, tenants were instructed by the officer to petition to stop school visits.

2. Tenants in Crookes have been instructed not to join a Federated group because the officer believes this group will want to make their site self-managing.
3. The officer is trying to replace the present Chair of the Allotment Federation.

## **Community groups targeted**

Several locally-funded community groups have been harassed and intimidated by being forced to operate to the letter of allotment law (1908 version).

One group has had the funding for a polytunnel for more than 2 years. They need sheltered space to accommodate groups of up to 12 clients (schoolchildren or people with care needs). The Planning Department state that there are no restrictions because polytunnels are classed as "temporary structures".

## **Community Sector Exclusion**

20 years ago, Heeley Farm took on 3 allotments to expand their capacity for therapeutic and productive horticulture, but were then banned from using them.

The Wildlife Trust have also been refused access to allotments in the past although they manage allotment land in Norfolk Park and the Manor.

In the 1990's, groups of all kinds were helped and encouraged to use allotments. Their presence and activities were perceived as being beneficial both for the public perception of allotments and to justify the use of tax-payers' money.

## **Hijacking Democracy**

As a civil servant representing the local authority, the officer should not involve himself in what can only be described as a series of political assassinations.

## **Playing politics**

As the main opportunity to contribute to local democracy, the council's Scrutiny Committee were asked to review policy on allotments in July 2006. Evidence submitted to the committee by the allotments department was evasive and misrepresented the true state of affairs, thereby showing contempt for the democratic process.

## Bullying

Fear of speaking out for fear of retribution.

Several tenants have reported the allotments officer expressing discrimination against: women / the disabled / young and old / the poor / vulnerable people.

By misleading management and executives, the local authority as a whole could be perceived as complicit in corruption.

For as long as S.C.C. judge that their "no-sacking" policy is more important than basic human rights, the situation is bound to deteriorate and the Council risks these issues being resolved in the media or in court.

One of the only rational explanations for the current situation is that the Officer is trying to prove that it would be cheaper for the council to pay him off to avoid the costs of compensation and legal fees

Strategically, there is a chance that all tenants are now unified against the authority and the pressure for positive action is still building.

## Illegal evictions

In the past year, there have been an increasing number of cases where tenants, who have paid their rent and are actively cultivating, have found themselves displaced without their knowledge. This means that the statutory process for eviction, which includes informing the tenant by registered post and notice on site, has not been followed.

1. In one case, a tenant with registered mental health problems was very disturbed by finding that he had lost a site after 7 years. As compensation (an admission he had been wrongly evicted), he was later provided with another plot and could start again.
2. Meersbrook Blind and Partially-sighted allotment group had planted 12 types of willow, which they intended to use for occupational therapy (basketry etc.). This plot was cleared and re-let.
3. A lady in Dore was told that her plot would be sub-divided and she would have to share with a stranger.
4. After 8 years, two tenants on Highcliffe found that they had been displaced. In this case, the "new tenants" took 2 weeks off work and spent the time clearing crops and a herb collection before the actual tenants realised what was happening

The council response to these cases has been to explain them away as "mistakes" and bureaucratic "errors". So far, these errors have not resulted in claims for compensation against the local authority or physical damage to either of the parties, who have been put in an adversarial position by their local authority.

## **Maladministration**

One recent and ongoing case has highlighted the escalation of problems caused by trying to defend an indefensible action, instead of admitting a mistake. See Orchard Allotment Vandalised...

## **Customer Service**

### **Appeals procedure**

Practically there is no process to appeal against the decisions of the officer. This means that issues can only be dealt with outside the Section, by involving managers at executive level.

### **Complaints procedure**

If you dare to raise a complaint against the department, you are likely to be accused of breaking some rule or even an attempt will be made to criminalise you, just to silence the critic.

Complaints made against allotment holders have not been addressed, unless and until it is in the perceived interests of the department ( i.e. to defend themselves against a complaint against them).

In certain cases, however, a lot of worker time has been devoted to intervening in neighbour disputes, which distorts them and blows them out of proportion. No central system where one person is responsible for managing more than 2000 human relationships can have sufficient information to effectively micro-manage complex situations.

### **Making sense of it**

The rational mind tries find some sense in what appears to be total confusion. The generally accepted theory is that the officer has been trying to create sufficient problems that his employers will find it easier to offer him redundancy... i.e. his actions could cost the authority so much either

1. in terms of executive time responding to appeals or
2. in cash terms for compensation for illegal acts or
3. in publicity terms, Sheffield's media image could be damaged

....that it is effectively cheaper to pay him off.

## Common Knowledge

Rony Robinson, BBC Radio Sheffield, explained the legal constraints the media operate under by referring to the Doncaster-Donnygate scandal where local media (and people) knew there had been corruption but could not broadcast until the conclusion of the official investigation.

Many other individuals and departments are well aware of the deficiencies of the allotments service, but no one seems to have had the clout to act.

Quite how long can this lamentable state of affairs be allowed to continue?

Inevitably, there will be many more individuals and organisations interested and involved in allotments in the future. This paper has been compiled to try to save them the grief which has typified allotment life in Sheffield for the past 20 years.

The solutions are simple: e.g. devolution of lettings and investment in local communities' organisational capacity. But because this state of affairs has been allowed to deteriorate for so long, the effort of remedying it has become proportionately greater.

Allotments and the communities that use them need due process and clear rules so that they can be included in the mainstream of society and can deliver the full contribution they are capable of making.