

Welcome to this 2015 AGM, looking back at 2014 and forward into 2015

Firstly, not exactly an apology - more an explanation of the Committee's recent eccentricities.

Most Members will know that our Treasurer Lynne Edlin – a familiar face over many years – has been very unwell for 18 months or so and I'm sorry to report that she has now resigned from the Committee.

I'm sure members will join me in formally thanking Lynne for all her time dealing with membership, our finances, producing and distributing numerous announcements & notices, growing vegetables for our two plant sales and all the other background 'stuff' that tends to go un-noticed – and to wish her well for the future.

We also lost Tom Hardy as he gave up his allotment to renovate a several hundred year old cottage in Yorkshire.

Fortunately, SRAA has had no major projects and no particular problems either, apart from theft of vegetables, flowers & fruit including complete bushes through much of last Summer, so the remaining four of us – Heather & Joy, David & I – have been able to deal with the annual routine without too much ado.

However, as members may have realised we have struggled to communicate by email and had to revert to the site notice board. With the advice & guiding hand of Huw Sperryn we have maintained our website [www.SRAA.org.uk](http://www.SRAA.org.uk) but we know from 'hit' counters that there have been no direct visits to our site, only large numbers of spiders & search engines (although those might hide genuine contacts who have 'searched' us via Google and other routes).

In the past, with eight or more on the Committee we had the luxury of running separate roles and having 'deputies' or assistants for each. More recently, as original committee members stepped down, it made sense to combine the Treasurer and Membership Secretary roles in particular, because they both involve finances.

What we have realised, during last year with Lynne often unavailable, is, of course, that a small committee is wholly dependent on individuals being routinely available.

The two areas where this mattered were the SRAA bank account at Barclays (which will issue statements to one contact only) – and our Members' list, which I'll come back to in a moment.

Firstly, to resolve the bank problem we four committee members decided to co-opt Melvyn Teare as acting Treasurer so that he could familiarise himself with our accounts before Audit. Some will remember that Melvyn audited our 'books' in the past, so now he himself has been audited by an external auditor, Neil Stiff.

For the record – Neil has no direct connection with SRAA, he's a long-time chum of mine and an acquaintance of Melvyn & Heather Teare from the days when we were all involved with Beaumont School's PTA. He audited SRAA last year, and now has audited our current accounts - and has done so without charge.

May I emphasise our warm thanks to Lynne for the extraordinary effort of preparing her records for us and also to Melvyn for stepping in to finalise our accounts for audit, and similarly to Neil for auditing at very short notice.

### **Members' records**

As we couldn't immediately transfer members' records from Lynne to send out the several necessary 'new year' notices, I built a list of email addresses from previous years' printed lists which gave us about 90% recovery. That list, plus new members and 2015's renewals have now been merged with the 2014 list which we subsequently obtained so we are able once again to communicate and members will see email information from us again. The merged file will be copied to the incoming Treasurer (Melvyn) and to Joy Bird as Membership Secretary where information will be held on PCs that are each more than routinely secure, communications will be sent either by secure 'chimps' or 'BCC' grouped attachments, and members' records will not be used for anything other than SRAA matters. I'm sure Members will understand that in the unfortunate circumstances at the time we were not able to email Members to seek advance approval of relocating Members' email information.

### **Membership**

We are pleased to report an increase in membership, which is easing towards 100 (≈50% of tenants) encouraged by our new 'Welcome' letter ( courtesy of Heather ) handed to all new tenants by John Willan.

Generally we are talking to various local suppliers about discounts to Members – if any member can offer such a discount locally, please do !

### **Notice board**

For those who are on their plots more often than at home peering at their magic lanterns we will continue to pin up most missives on the Members notice board. I said 'pin-up' although we won't be using 'pins' at all soon as our intention is to replace our elderly blackboard with a metal board as soon as our cash-flow allows. At present, we also have a lockable cabinet on the right-hand side 'statutory' notices, rules & regulations but which we think no-one actually looks into because there's a permanent heap of chippings in front of it. We are considering moving that cabinet over to the left where it will be possible to read what's in it and then install a painted metal 'board' for our specific notices (held on with magnets) where the blackboard is now. We'll keep the blackboard for a while as a members' notice board, as we think it might be helpful for Members to be able to ask other Members for items or for help or advice, or to offer items or surplus produce. If it's not used, we'll decide what to do with it later.

It's all too easy to spend £800+ on these notice boards and we have no intention of doing so. A few companies have standardised panels but they're still £500 typically, so we are looking at a simple DIY alternative with a maximum of £200. If anyone has business connections with a sheet metal company where a hefty discount might be offered, please let us know ! Once we've bought it, we'll need to install it, so help with that part too would be welcome.

## **Maintenance needed**

As I have mentioned previously, due to the hard work of earlier Members, we have accumulated some valuable assets, particularly our International Headquarters and two other sheds, plus five raised beds, some smart furniture and three pub bench tables. Inevitably, most of these now need maintenance, re-painting, oiling and so on.

One pub bench is beyond hope but the two others need urgent attention.

Organising on-going repairs is easy enough when there's eight or ten to do it but we four obviously can't cope with a maintenance schedule too, so we hope that several members will offer to form a 'task-force' to rescue these assets. We will put out a list of 'jobs' by email shortly.

Our Willow Tunnel was a great idea at the time but, as it's seldom used and needs constant attention, we are intending to remove it. If anyone wants it – or will commit to maintaining it, please let Joy know soon.

## **Members' Toilet**

Since our toilet was installed, three of our ladies have been providing the 'consumables', topping up the washing water, generally tidying & sweeping it out, which is very good of them but cannot continue, so we intend to extend the scope of the contract with the toilet servicing company to include cleaning and providing.

## **General Information**

### **Meeting at SADC**

Three of us attended a meeting of Council allotment representatives at SADC on Monday (9<sup>th</sup> February)

Whilst we appreciated SADC holding this first meeting, particularly because it gave each allotment location an opportunity to meet the others, we felt that this was motivated rather more by SADC's need to float ideas than by a burning desire within SADC to improve communications between allotment groups.

Although nothing is decided – the meeting was merely to exchange opinions, experiences, suggestions etc – it is likely that 'Allotments' will see a transfer of management to a City Neighbourhood Committee (CNC) (a 'city' version of Parish Councils ) and, with that administrative change, an increase in local involvement (us), from perhaps two meetings a year (as Monday's meeting) through to full management of sites by local groups such as SRAA including financial control of all costs, placing sub-contacts and setting annual fees for all tenants.

Very broadly, the allotment representatives thought full management might work on small sites with perhaps only 20 allotments, but would be increasingly impractical with larger sites, particularly ours with 200 tenants. Most of this conversation aired concerns about the need for full-time on-site managers, alluded to the way many schools have become Academies, legal & financial liabilities - and that fees would probably vary from site-to-site (see below)

Various other topics were discussed –

Waiting lists remain lengthy, although SADC didn't have details beyond numbers of applicants waiting.

SADC will now calculate and publish likely waiting periods.

We have 194 plots with 45 waiting, which equates to about 2 years.

Plot inspections will be based on 75% constant cultivation or preparation – increased from 50%

Notices to Quit will be issued following one, not two, warning letters.

Non-cultivation notices will carry forward over year ends, not be single year only.

Some of the delay with new tenants appearing is caused by non-responses to SADC's letters (telling applicants there is a plot available), where applicants have moved house or changed their email provider, plus refusals to take on some plots, plus some changing their minds due to personal circumstances.

Security will be emphasised more than in the past – Rule 3:21 states that all gates must now be "locked".

Garden gates from neighbouring houses will be closed or blocked off.

Dumping by neighbouring houses will be acted upon more assertively.

Separately from the CNC change above, it did seem probable that allotment fees will be increased significantly and steadily, mainly to reduce the Council's subsidy. Whilst most tenants can afford more, it does raise the issue of the poorest being priced out of growing their own healthy vegetables.

## **Police Commissioner**

Previously, in January we had a visitation and walk-around by Hertfordshire's Police Commissioner, David Lloyd, and several of his staff, as part of a multi-location tour of our area starting with a round-table meeting in SADC.

Whilst he and his people were very welcome, and it gave us a few minutes to emphasise the community value of allotments, the notion that 'plotters' were the law-abiding, upright citizens of Hertfordshire and to impart similarly positive thoughts, we were a little puzzled about why we had been selected for his visit.

## **Events**

**Plant Sale 1 Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> March**

**Plant Sale 2 Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> May**

**Barbeque Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> July**

## **Finally**

We were six, then four, now five Committee members, which is ok for the routine admin as I said earlier but not enough if anything significant comes along, so we hope a few members will either join us on the committee or offer support at events and with the tasks that we will detail soon. If you have ideas about further improving our site, please let us know.

Thank you to all members for your support      Derek Tarrant 12 February 2015