

Creating community plots - the story of Woodend Allotments

Background

The idea for plots in Banchory arose from work of Woodend Arts Association (WAA), a volunteer-led community project which was formed [as a registered Scottish Charity] in 1992. WAA runs the Woodend Barn Arts Centre in Banchory and organises music, drama, dance, art and craft events and workshops (see: www.woodendbarn.co.uk). WAA has always been interested in exploring all aspects of art and the arts, and there has been an environmental strand to its work since 2002 when it helped form the Aberdeenshire Slow Food Convivium, promoting local, preferably organic, food (see: www.slowfood.com). In 2003 WAA organised an exhibition by a local artist, Janet McEwan, called "Waste not, Want not". The exhibition was accompanied by a week long series of events drawing attention to the wastefulness of our society and promoting less waste and more recycling. ["Waste not, Want not" also involved a poet working in local primary schools over the three weeks ahead of the exhibition culminating in an exhibition in Banchory Academy.]

Discussions in 2002/3 around Slow Food, reducing waste, composting and other such important issues, led to the idea that we should take more practical steps to promote local food production. A number of local people helped two local growers establish an organic farming business in the area and promoted a vegetable box scheme in Banchory. And WAA held a public meeting at the Woodend Barn in 2002 to see if there was sufficient interest to form an Allotments group. Six people attended but most were keen gardeners who already had ground but were interested in what we were planning. With only 2 or 3 interested in having a plot, and fewer interested in creating a new Allotments group, fund-raising etc, the idea lapsed.

Interest in the idea smouldered for two years until two further public meetings in late 2004 and early 2005 led to the formation of Woodend Allotments, a constituted voluntary group with a committee of six prepared to drive the project forward. The following steps outline the experience of Woodend Allotments and may be helpful to others planning a similar project.

Step 1: finding some ground . . .

Once you have established the will and enthusiasm, you need some ground. WAA lease the Woodend Barn from the Leys Estate [who own much of the land between Crathes and Banchory]. Leys Estate have always been very supportive of WAA's work and they responded positively to suggestions in 2002 that allotment gardens might occupy the field immediately behind the Woodend Barn.

Step 2: forming a committed group . . .

This step took us several years. By 2004 we had found about a dozen people keen to work a plot but no-one keen to attend committees and fund-raise. By early 2005 six generous people agreed to brave the donkey-work necessary to form Woodend Allotments (WA) as a constituted organisation (with elected officers, a bank account etc) and turn the plots into reality.

Step 3: clarifying what you want to do and how then to do it . . .

In tune with all activity at Woodend Barn, it was decided that we should seek to include all parts of the community in the plots. This meant keeping rental costs for a plot to below a pound a week so that no-one was excluded. We also actively sought the involvement of various local groups including schools, the Scolty Centre and community mental health.

How many plots would we cater for? We had about 15 people signed up at this stage and thought that 25 plots might be all that would be needed. However, the field available could easily accommodate at least 36 plots (18m by 9m each) and the costs of fencing, complications of the Lease and planning permission etc meant that we could not easily expand the number of plots once we had started. After much discussion, we decided to go for the whole area available, thinking that we might have to grass half of it for the first year or two until all plots were taken (as it happened, all plots were taken within a couple of months of opening).

A budget was drawn up to provide deer and rabbit-fencing, car parking spaces, community cabin and shed, and hedge planting. The budget came to an intimidating £12,000. Given that, once established, there would be ongoing running costs, we needed to fund the capital costs to set up the plots through grants and donations. Before applying for funding, we needed to establish rights over the land. Leys Estate were happy to negotiate a Lease for the field but this was likely to take months as it involved lawyers etc. To allow us to proceed immediately with the fund-raising, Leys Estate provided WA with a letter which agreed the main terms of the Lease, including a 30-year term for the land.

With WAA advice and support, £9,500 was raised from Awards for All and £1,500 from Aberdeenshire Council via the Marr Area Partnership (MAP) during 2006. In addition, British Gas generously funded a communal shed. The balance of the budget would be provided by voluntary labour, borrowing skills and equipment where necessary.

Step 4: Dealing with the administration. Sadly, you're not immune from legal and accounting requirements just because you're a "not for profit" organisation. HM Revenue & Customs provide some very useful guidance for small clubs and societies at:

<http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/guidance/clubs-societies.htm> You also need to deal with matters such as insurance. If you can co-opt people who have experience of running businesses and/or other small clubs onto the committee then so much the better.

Step 5: preparations for the plots . . .

During 2006, in parallel with negotiating the Lease, we had several meetings with the local planning authority. To our surprise, we needed planning permission to change the use of the field from agriculture to horticulture. The planners were keen on the idea of allotments and generally very helpful, but this was still a time-consuming and sometimes frustrating process. I think we were the first application for allotments that Aberdeenshire planners had ever seen, so hopefully future applications will be easier for everyone

concerned. As part of the planning application, we wrote a Development Brief (governing size of plots, sheds permitted, storage issues, hedges etc) and a Maintenance Brief (governing how the site would be managed and maintained).

During 2006 we also obtained various quotations for the fencing and other works. We discovered that every topic has its important intricacies.....exactly what sort of fencing? what spacing of fence posts? what sort of gates? closure mechanisms? locks? what sort of sheds? how big/tall? what colour? what services? what sort of car park? what material? how drained? and so on. Our committee have become quite knowledgeable about a range of subjects!

Having lined up all the contractors/suppliers, we found we still did not quite have the planning permission, but it would be coming imminently . . .

Step 6: running a small construction project . . .

Many books have been written on this subject....save to say here that you need one 'project manager' who has experience of running a project, is a team player and is sighted on all aspects of the project. Even given all the right skills, which are rarely available, there is still the challenge of trying to get different elements of the work done at the right time.

For all sorts of reasons, our deer and rabbit-proof fence arrived 3 months after the plots opened (no-one wanted to defer the April 2007 opening). So potatoes were very popular to begin with and when the fence arrived, we had a rabbit-clearing project. 15 plot-holders and friends, 5 dogs and three ferrets (to get under sheds) were gainfully employed for a couple of hours driving rabbits out of the plots.

Another Step 6: signing up all your plot-holders . . .

In parallel with the project work, we drafted a Plot-holders' Tenancy Agreement that each plot-holder could sign as a contract with WA. This details all the rights and obligations of the plot-holder and links to our Lease for the land (in effect, the plot-holders are sub-tenants). We used a model from the web: <http://www.bidefordtown.co.uk/Allotments.html> and adapted it for a private agreement (i.e. removing all references to Councils and various public Acts). Anyone contemplating setting up allotments should spend some hours on the web - there is a huge amount of useful information and experience freely available. To start with, try: www.sags.org.uk/, www.nsalg.org.uk/, www.allotment.org.uk/

Step 7: digging and planting . . .

We sometimes thought we'd never get to this bit. It's hard work but great fun . . . but do all allotments have to have couch grass? and slugs? and potato blight just because it rains for most of June and July ?

Postscript:

All the plots at Woodend Barn have been allocated and there is currently a waiting list. If you would like to join the waiting list, e-mail mark@woodendbarn.co.uk
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