

Cripley Meadow Allotment Association 2020 Annual Report (for 2021 AGM)

1. Introduction and Overview

By Manda Joyce

Just over a year ago we held our AGM as usual in St Barnabas School hall. Although we provided hand sanitiser, we had no idea then of the deep and sustained impact that Covid-19 would have on our lives. I would never have imagined that I'd be grateful to minister Michael Gove, but was truly thankful when he came out so quickly to say allotments were inherently safe and could stay open.

And we did stay open. Yes, with restrictions, but there for gardening exercise, nature, calm, some sociability, a sense of purpose and hope in the future. The Committee's aim in managing the site in this period has been to keep the site legal and to make it feel - and be - as safe as possible for all members, some of whom are particularly vulnerable. We thank you for your compliance and support. We also wanted to respond to the unprecedented level of new applicants and to keep up with site maintenance and development.

Wendy gives a detailed list of site developments below. In addition to new plots and new members, new communal water harvesting, track repairs and tree work, we kept the shop open, skip and grass management going, carried out two audits, awarded the Harry Stone cup and marked the end of the Castle Mill project. OCC restrictions meant no fires on plots – but the communal bonfire continues to be burnt by the Committee. Normal working parties had to be suspended because of Covid, but we did manage to hold two orchard WPs (social distancing possible) and used employed labour to keep on top of WP jobs. Jamie, our Treasurer, reflects below on the impact that keeping the show on the road during Covid has had on our finances, and the way forward.

Two other (thankfully) rare occurrences to note: the tree by the gate shed a large bough one stormy morning, meaning the site had to be closed until its safety could be assessed and assured (only a few hours, thankfully); ne'er do wells came on site on night and vandalised some members' sheds. We will re-paint the anti-climb paint on the gate as soon as conditions allow and are investigating the possibility of movement-activated lighting at the suggestion of the University's Security team.

A big topic in last year's Annual Report was the financial and constitutional implications of the upcoming new lease with our landlord, Oxford City Council. In terms of finances, we explained that the Association was moving into a new phase where it needed to be able to sustain its £60k+ worth of communal assets (orchards, fencing, gates, bridges, the shop and other communal sheds and storage, water tanks, pipes and pumps, mowers, strimmers, shredders and hand tools, safety equipment, raised beds, picnic tables and event shelters, wheelbarrows and so on) without the external funding we had come to rely on. The membership agreed to the establishment of a sinking fund for future asset maintenance, and a two-stage increase in plot fees for this year (2021-2 – 50%, implemented in this year's invoices) and 2022-3 (a further 20%). The Treasurer's Report, below, provides more detail on our financial situation Suffice it to say that, with the extra pressure that the Virus has put on our funds and on the wider economy, our move to strengthen our finances seems even more timely. Even with increased plot fees, careful financial management will be needed over the next few years to enable us to keep an even keel.

With regard to the constitutional changes, Covid has delayed the final draft of the new lease with OCC and the move to incorporated form is also proving less straightforward than we had hoped. However, it is clear that incorporation is the only way forward – see below for why - so we are putting that to members for a vote in principle, with the promise of a later meeting and vote on the detail when it is available.

From March 2020 to March 2021 the Committee was as follows:

- Wendy Skinner Smith, Plot 40-41 – Chair/Trustee – new member tours and waiting list, writing the newsletter, managing the working party and site jobs list, oversight of site grass cutting and tree work, Castle Mill project liaison, lease re-negotiation.
- Manda Joyce, Plot 72 and 79 – Vice Chair and Secretary/Trustee – committee meeting administration, new member administration and membership records (now handed over to Phyllis), GDPR, member communication, website, Castle Mill project liaison.
- Jamie Forbes, Plot 63 – Treasurer, plus machine maintenance and petrol, social events.
- Emma Delap, Plot 1a - machinery records, tree and shed permissions. 2020 Audit lead (jointly with Christine)
- Sarah Edwards, Plot 120 – trading shop, deliveries.
- Keith Holton, Plot 131 - skip renewal, deliveries.
- Jeremy Hyde, Plot 91 – recycling, major projects, monthly paid site work.
- Ilias Kounatidis Plots 2 and 3 – Orchard Lead
- Christine Melia, Plot 5a – projects, asset management and maintenance planning. Joint Audit lead with Emma.
- Julia Popescu, Plot 127- former Castle Mill representative.
- Alice Sprinkle, Plot 126e – co-opted to the Committee in Feb 2021 as Castle Mill representative.
- Phyllis Starkey, Plot SF7 – Membership Secretary (administration of joiners and leavers, membership records).

All committee members help with working parties and/or audits.

Rodney Smith was co-opted to the Committee to help with the orchards, Anna Benn manages the communal espalier pear trees and Richard Haigh does site weed spraying.

The Committee, like so many, moved its work online. We have held some dozen video conferenced committee meetings and a number of ad-hoc online meetings in various sub-groups. During the year, Audit Lead Tia Sedley stepped down, while new Orchard Lead Ilias Kounatidis and Castle Mill representative, Alice Sprinkle joined. The biggest news was Wendy's announcement that she intended to step down as Chair of CMAA after 18 years of service. Wendy has grafted unstintingly to create the well-organised, vibrant, productive site that you see around you today. She would be the first to say that it's been a team effort, but we all know that such an enterprise only succeeds with great leadership. Wendy has written a 'farewell' below, and we will take a moment to thank her and present her with a gift from us all, thanks to many members' generous contribution to her leaving collection. We hope to have the opportunity to say a proper, in person, social (party!) thank-you to her when circumstances permit. The election of our new Chair is on the agenda for this AGM.

2. From our outgoing Chair, a Site Update...

By Wendy Skinner Smith

Since March 15th, the start of our 2020 gardening and membership year, CMAA received 98 emails asking about a plot. We stopped tours for new members on March 16th - our tours had been a prerequisite for Cripley Meadow membership for 17 years - and our waiting list was 32 within a few months! This is more

than our usual turnover in a year. Clearly the Pandemic has made more aware of the benefits of working with nature and concerns about sustainable food and food security.

We cleared and covered vacant plots (thanks to our self-employed site workers Arthur and Harry) so that neighbours were not dealing with seeding weeds. Towards the end of May we were looking at how we could put space to use safely before the main growing season was over. With a mixture of information to potential members and replies to question, maps, plot information, rules and the need for reading, followed by telephone discussions about the constitution and rules, and short, physically distanced visits just to look at one plot... we have thankfully managed to give some new members the chance of a space to work with nature and the soil and grow food. Some took on plots that needed a season's break to clear persistent and perennial weed, some were digging within a few short hours. We kept in touch with people on the waiting list as time allowed so we could keep them updated. As a result, about 20 either did not reply to our questions- so never made the list - or they were phoned with a possibility and told us they had plots elsewhere.

Almost without exception new members were asked to visit the plot that day or the next and, provided I had had time to keep up with the very few releases, plots have generally gone within 24 hours. Even without a pandemic I think this new way of doing things has some worth. Having information on new members helps with assessing need. The biggest demand is for small plots - 50sqm and below - and the Committee needs to balance the site needs and facilities. Not all plots have been subdivided and we have tried to clump small plots. We have added a few and divided some - another 2 small beds on 64/65, 70 and 71 were released and became 6 plots, a grassy space was newly cultivated on 119 next to the shop, leaving Sarah space for shop working. We cleared 153, the last plot on the 2005 initial reclamation list, which had been delayed by flooding and the need for tree work. This became 4 small plots with 152 becoming a half plot. Thanks are due to pre-existing members for their cooperation. We understand site work can involve unwelcome changes for some as the Committee balance effective use of the site, demand and the common good. This is never easy.

Since the beginning of May and always following Covid-19 restriction I have had 1 to 1 short meetings on site with 58 new members. Some plots will have benefited from a season of cover as they were badly infested with perennial weed. The 2021 Spring audit will, as usual, pick up any concerns about lack of cultivation. We presently have 21 on our waiting list including 5 in the last week. If you have more space then you can use, do let us know and you will make someone happy. As with all worthwhile activities, it takes time, but new members and enthusiasm about growing local food are always cause for optimism.

Jeremy, Arthur, Harry, and now Tom have all picked up site work this year on a self-employed basis to cover work that would usually be done by our working parties. We also have another member interested in site work. We have covered payment through our reserves and asset maintenance funds. We have improved communal water harvesting, agreed to be a focus for using the Castle Mill mitigation funds we received from Oxford University.

The work has been managed largely by email, with me writing job descriptions and work lists, site workers submitting (great) plans for work and structures, distanced site discussions with myself and Jeremy. Jeremy provides supplies and organises storage and availability.

Here is a list of what's been achieved - Clear behind green shed (ongoing), manage fire bin, replace both bridges to Cripsey island/ renew tree guards, manage and remove damaged trees on the island, replace stakes, Summer pruning of orchards, remove hawthorns on boundary fence, 64/65cgf replace raised bed

sides. remove raised beds ab/ 20, remove oversized fruit trees 1ft apart and prune/ 64/64 insert another small plot (not raised) 64/65d and g, 48a Remove wire fencing, 119a dig a new small plot, 53 remove trees on boundary remove, too large for small plot restricting growth on 53 and 54, 70 remove door - shed to become a shelter area for small plots (not storage), 64/65d remove dead apple tree, 64/65 remove unproductive and damaged plum trees, pear and apple, remove bramble from 154 fence, remove fruit tree from 153/4 boundary path, remove fruit trees from 153, 155 remove hazel and treat stumps, 159 save apple tree and prune, Ilias - Cripsey Orchard/Castle Mill Orchard work remove any dead trees, check wires and stakes, put in strimmer guards, remove any brash, 54 shed roof to be extended and ready for guttering and raised safe stands for 2x1000L water butts. Track work done by ODS included Central path past the green, by the gate, Castle Mill path past plot 37, path adjacent to 57.

After a pause whilst Oxford Direct Services were furloughed in Lockdown 1, we picked up site mowing and boundary maintenance again in late April. The present Oxford Direct Services team and management are efficient, hardworking, a pleasure to work with and good value.

We managed an orchard working party of 14, organised via email, and did some of the summer pruning. Wendy Manda, Jamie, and our new orchard manager, Ilias, completed the work and shredded the waste. Ilias replaced the rest of the tree guards and did some further pruning on the green. Ilias and I worked on saving 159's apple tree (the one behind the skip – it had split at the head of its trunk). In February there will be some hazel coppicing, weather permitting. Hazel sticks should be available for sale at the shop.

Due to flooding and Covid-19 we are behind with boundary tree management. On Cripsey Island south side willows need pollarding, plums managing, weeping willow needs making safe, and a lime is dead and needs removing. Sylva trees have been in touch and plan to do this, weather permitting, in March. Castle Mill south boundary 1-6 plot willows and trees need pollarding and coppicing, trees in the SW corner by the green shed are damaged and crashed. This is in OCC management plan and we are liaising with them to arrange.

... and a Farewell

Firstly, a bow to all Cripsey Meadow members since the 1890s in celebration of our Allotments' longevity and value. The social and cultural benefit of an allotment for individuals and communities should not be underestimated, particularly now, when the double whammy of the pandemic and climate change has made many pause to reflect.

I am all too aware that some members will have concerns about health, family, jobs and finances. This, and my 'retirement', has prompted me to recall that my voluntary work resulted from what seemed a personal disaster, 20 years ago. After 30 years teaching in 3 local comprehensives schools and as First Deputy of The Cherwell School, I was not managing my, admittedly, 'over'-working habits. Medication was not controlling my quirky heart electrics and 3 'visits' to a resus table could not be ignored. I loved my job but after more testing, advice and talking therapy I accepted early retirement. I had become a shadow of my usual confident self, our family income had plummeted, and Cripsey Meadow was no longer just an organic healthy green option for a vegetarian family but a necessary part of our family resources. For 2 years I worked my plot, improved my successional sowing and planting, cried less, and gradually reduced the attacks and medication. By 2002 I was the painter I once thought I might be before teaching had proved more exciting and demanding. I have no doubt that nature and nurture forged me as a pragmatic optimist ...but gardening restored my wellbeing.

The early 2000s was a tumultuous time for Cripsey Meadow with the dramatic divisive behaviour that often follows on from too few members, too little cultivation, too many trees and brambles and an alarming

rabbit population! Susanna Pressel, our ever-supportive counsellor, attended Cripsey Meadow's Emergency General Meeting in May 2004 and informed us that Cripsey Meadow was at serious risk of being taken back by the Council. By then I was ready and able to take on voluntary work. Gardening fitted well with painting. Now I can walk around Cripsey Meadow with enormous, shared pride and joy as the product of the many who have so generously contributed and supported its reclamation.

Many have had to 'reset' their lives. We have had an unprecedented 90 plot enquiries plots since March 2020. Whilst observing lockdown and prioritising safety, we quickly used up our 'turnover' and we have organised and liberated new spaces. Few of you are probably aware that present members share some 7,000 sqm of 'communal' space on Cripsey Meadow, not including the unusable Badgerland (the fenced off area full of trees south of the Shop). This is the equivalent of lots of plots but most of it is already committed to productive shared use as it proved unsuitable as plots. The Green is our only large under-used space... a bit big even for our largest communal lunches. If the present level of demand is sustained and present plots are well used, I trust we will continue to work to share our designated land. I initiated 'The Green' in 2007 as it housed some patches of waste better suited to some native shrubs, coppiced hazels, and fruit trees. I have introduced it thus to all new members ever since as we have had no sustained waiting list since we developed the South Field in 2011. The Green could have enough space for 8 x 5 pole plots or the equivalent (stopping before the BBQ), opposite plots 92- 96 while retaining a generous, central, horseshoe shaped Green with trees, benches, and wood chip. This is for others to consider and take forward in future if needed.

As chair of Oxford's allotment umbrella group, the ODFAA, until 2020, and particularly in co-writing ' A Growing Concern' for ODFAA's Centenary 1917- 2017, I over-stretched my completer-finisher gene and (poor) writing skills. That work has enabled me to set Cripsey Meadow in some local and national context. Presently I hold our archive and the story of Cripsey Meadow may be taking shape? It will anyway eventually be a list of 'what happened when'. Jamie, Manda, and I will probably be the last trustees of Cripsey Meadow before the necessary move to becoming incorporated. I am confident that those standing in 2021 are will make the most of Cripsey Meadow's future and that with **your help and support** its magnificent natural mosaic will thrive.

Rodney and I will remain plot holders and will be happily co-opted as orchard helpers and shredder operatives... but as from March 21st I will play no part in committee meetings nor site management. I am so looking forward to a return to communal allotment work and play. We all know that allotments are good for you and for the planet.

3. 2020 Trading Shop Report

By Sarah Edwards

This year has been much busier than usual for the allotment 'shop' because of Covid. Not only were members spending more time on their plots, but access to some materials became difficult. Even when people could reach shops or order online, some supplies ran low.

Before the pandemic, there was little activity due to flooding, but then things took off! We adopted a fresh approach to ensure safety, including purchases by appointment only and payment online where possible. Reluctantly, we decided not to receive and give away spare seeds in the way we usually do. By popular request, we supplied potting compost this year, in addition to the bags of manure, and aim to do so again this spring. As usual we sold second hand tools and equipment, which we get when departing members donate or leave things behind. Naturally they are especially valued by new members. Demand outstrips supply, so if any members have any useful items to spare, please let me know! sarahjehome@aol.com.

Our total income for the year was £3,130 and we spent £2,606 on buying items on the price list. We aim to keep prices low for members' benefit, but to raise some money to contribute to site running

costs. Our net income or profit for 2020 was £582. This figure takes into account the stock levels at the start and end of year.

Finally, many thanks to those who helped in different ways with the shop this year; particularly Jamie, who managed the many bank transactions, Iulia and Ben who helped with deliveries, and to Manda for updating the website.

4. 2020 Audit Report

By Emma Delap and Christine Melia

Two audits were carried out in 2020.

On the whole, the site has never looked better with many able to spend more time on their plots than usual. However, some members found themselves in very difficult circumstances, stranded elsewhere, shielding, with health problems etc, meaning they could not manage their plots. The Committee's aim was to balance individual circumstances against the potential nuisance that neglected plots cause to their neighbours. Our approach was in tune with the guidelines the National Allotment Society (NSALG) issued to help committees and members steer their way through this unprecedented period. Communication, a willingness to be flexible and find solutions has meant that, in most cases, amicable arrangements were made.

The Spring audit was 'light touch', with the emphasis on identifying significant issues, particularly where they could cause problems for neighbouring plots. The Autumn audit was more thorough so that members knew where they stood when they came to plan for the start of a more normal (we hope) start to the 2021 gardening year.

Audits are a huge job, taking up an enormous amount of Committee time, especially for those who volunteer to lead them. This year has involved even more work as many complicated personal circumstances and individual action plans had to be taken into account. The Committee appreciates that getting emails from us asking you to deal with infringements of the rules can be unwelcome, but we have found over the years that treating everyone by common standards that we have all agreed to is the only way to be fair to everyone.

We would like to thank the majority of ploholders who worked so hard to produce an impressive range of crops over such a challenging year.

5. 2020 Financial Report

By Treasurer, Jamie Forbes

Below are the finalised accounts for January-December 2020 approved by our Auditor Ken Jones.

CRIPLEY MEADOW ALLOTMENT ASSOCIATION 2020 ACCOUNTS

	Cash	Bank	2020 Total	Note	2019 Total
Opening Balance	882.37	28293.37	29175.74		13799.93
Income					
Grants, Prizes, Other		1200.00	1200.00	1	2000.00
Subscription & membership		8115.03	8115.03	2	7668.29
Donations		1994.45	1994.45	3	2400.20
Sale of products - Trading Shop	146.54	2983.93	3130.47	4	1376.15
On site sales		1423.00	1423.00	5	275.00
Fundraising		0.00	0.00	6	431.50
Key deposits collected		1675.00	1675.00	20	1350.00
Annual Income	146.54	17391.41	17537.95		33501.14
Expenditure					
Rent to Oxford City Council		1150.00	1150.00	7	1150.00
Products for resale - Trading		2605.62	2605.62	8	1533.13
Equipment / its repair / key cutting		1484.52	1484.52	9	786.87
Mowing & strimming		2586.12	2586.12	10	2845.04
Skips		1608.00	1608.00	11	1266.00
Paid site work		4865.17	4865.17	12	964.68
Path resurfacing		1200.00	1200.00	13	4182.00
Black plastic for plots		858.07	858.07	14	
Other site incl weedkilling, fuel		21.44	21.44	15	2872.53
Treework		2622.02	2622.02	16	888.00
Petty cash / Misc		246.82	246.82	17	253.20
Subscription, membership, insurance		878.00	878.00	18	919.25
Fundraising		0.00	0.00	19	40.00
Key deposits returned		325.00	325.00	20	425.00
Annual expenditure	0.00	20450.78	20450.78		18126.7
Subtotal	1028.91	25234.00	26262.91		29175.37
Transfers	-718	718			
Closing Balance	310.91	25952.00	26262.91		29175.37
Profit/Loss for Year			-2912.83		15375.44
Adjusted Profit/Loss for Year			Net £1200 grant	-4112.83	Net £20000 grant
					-4624.56

Notes

- 1200 Grant money from ODFAA/OCC road for maintenance. Last round of grants available
- Subs and membership dues. The membership grew by 34 members in 2020: From 224 to 258 at the end of 2020
- Donations are primarily from members who have paid £15 in lieu of participating in a work party over the 2019 season. Very few members chose not to pay this contribution, either by participation or financial contribution. The 2020 AGM agreed to make this a mandatory contribution to our community maintenance efforts however the financial obligation has been waived for 2020 as there were very few opportunities for work party participation due to COVID. Members that feel financially strapped have been encouraged to do an extra work party in lieu of payment when conditions allow.
- See trading shop report - Revenue £3130 COG £2605 Net profit 582 Stock estimated to be £124 higher than end of 2019. Approximately 16% gross margin
- We sold used fencing for £650. The remaining £773 is the sale of black plastic to (new) plot members
- No Jericho Fair in 2020
- Rent to OCC as usual. May change upon completion of new lease. New lease may be finalised in 2021
- See trading shop report - surplus stock as at end of 2020
- Equipment, it's repair and key cutting.
- 11 mows
- 6 skips - price rose ~10% £252 x2 + £276 x4
- Paid Site Work - Breakdown:

Plot Clearance/ Transfer	2070.00			
Site Management & Organisation	420.00			
Site Repair and Maintenance	1427.81			
Site Improvement	847.36			
Charge through to member	100.00			
Total	4865.17	2070	1170	1625.17
				4865.17

Site Management and Organisation encompasses work such as skip and bonfire management.
 Repair and maintenance included replacement of island bridge, rebuild of raised beds and shed door repair.
 Site improvement included continued development of shared water harvesting facility

- 1200 Grant money from ODFAA/OCC road for maintenance. Last round of grants available
- Will roll into shop sales
- See trading shop report - surplus stock as at end of 2020
- Maintenance of trees paid to ODS £1393.14 - Orchard Expenses £1228.88
- Domain/chalk/Harry's Cup
- Membership to NSALG which provides members insurance plus support for incorporating the planned Coop structure under new lease
- No Jericho Fair stand in 2020
- Balance up by £1350 ... 54 keys

Independent Examiner's Report to Cripsey Meadow Allotment Association

I have examined the above income and expenditure account for the year ended 31st December 2020 and can confirm that it has been properly drawn up and is in accordance with the books and records presented to me.

K. Jones

10 February 2021

The figures for 2019 are shown in the right-hand column for comparison, with numbered explanatory notes to explain each figure. It is worth noting that the increase in plot fees agreed at our last AGM only took effect in 2021, so are not reflected in these figures.

The Pandemic has affected our finances in several ways. On the positive side, the Trading Shop has seen higher turnover (so a small increase in profit) and we have more members, so an increase in plot fee

income. On the other hand, we have not been able to fundraise at Jericho Fair, we have spent more on skips than planned (there was a price increase, but we also used more skips as people spent more time on their plots and had a good clear out), and we have needed more keys cut for our new members. We have used paid labour to develop new plots to address our waiting list and to keep the site going while we were unable to hold our usual Working Parties (see breakdown under note 12).

Expenditure on the orchards increased compared with 2019 – the tree guards, stakes and mats were due an overhaul and we took advantage of having an Orchard Manager and two Orchard Working Parties to make progress.

Our accounts show a closing balance of £26,262 at the end of the year. Members may ask themselves why then we needed to increase plot fees. The full background is in [last year's AGM papers](#) but to recap the main points.

- Some of the funds we hold do not belong to the Association, but to members. They are members' key deposits and are re-payable to members when keys are returned. This amount currently stands at around £4,600.
- The accounts show, net of external grant income, we ran at a loss of over £4,000 in the last two years. In other words, our regular income was falling short of our regular outgoings, clearly not sustainable.

It is worth noting that our regular outgoings do not allow for any project or development work that members may wish to be undertaken in the future. We have been successful in the past in obtaining external funding for our development work, but it seems very unlikely we will be able to do that in the current financial climate. We hope that our finances will in future allow such work to be undertaken from our own funds, but this is not a current priority.

- The Association built up over £60k's worth of communal assets over the last decade or so, but cannot rely on external funding to maintain or replace them so needs to 'save up' in what is called a 'sinking fund' for to cover those future expenses. At last year's AGM, members agreed to establish the sinking fund at £12,600 and to continue to build it up over the next few years. That means that £12,600 of the Closing Balance is allocated to the Sinking Fund for this year, and that our income next year needs to increase to enable us to add to the Sinking Fund.
- We need to hold some 'reserves'. This is money to cover un-foreseen and unplanned expenditure – such as the cost of dealing with a Pandemic. A year's expenditure (in our case around £18,000) tends to be used as a rough guide.

If you take our Closing Balance of £26,262, take off the members' key deposits (£4,600) and sinking fund (£12,600) that leaves a reserve at the end of 2020 of £9,062. So fees needed to increase to make up for the shortfall in regular income vs expenditure and to build up the Sinking Fund and depleted Reserves.

At the time of writing, the Committee has yet to finalise the Budget for 2021 but it will be ready for the AGM when I will show it on screen and talk you through it. One of the most important factors will be when we can re-start our Working Parties. It would seem reasonable to assume that the latest date would be June, as long as the Government's roadmap holds good. So there will be at least a quarter, and perhaps half, of 2021 when we will need to continue to use paid labour to keep the Site going.

6. 2020 Membership Secretary's Report

By Phyllis Starkey

I took over as Membership Secretary from Manda in October 2020 as part of a more equitable distribution of tasks across Committee members.

I am the guardian and keeper of the membership spreadsheet, recording plot numbers and sizes and changes when members join, leave or update their contact details. Once a year the spreadsheet is used by the Treasurer to create the invoices for annual subscriptions, and, in between, it is accessed by Committee Officers when they need to communicate with Members.

I am also responsible for issuing keys to new members and collecting them back from those departing. I periodically visit our specialist supplier in Cowley to replenish our stock of secure keys.

The spreadsheet also holds some historical information – recording when members joined and what plots they had in the past. This helps with audits, for example.

With lockdown and increased demand for plots, several bigger plots have been subdivided and the influx of new members has resulted in a membership of 258 at the start of 2021 (up from 225 at the start of 2020). It has been great to see such enthusiasm – all we need now is good growing conditions.

7. Lease Re-negotiation and Incorporation

By Manda Joyce

Negotiations for our new lease with our landlord, Oxford City Council, continue. We had hoped a final version of the text would be ready by now, so that we could present it to you at this AGM, but the impact of Covid on the Council has pushed it back to September 2021. Oxford's allotment umbrella group, the Oxford and District Federation of Allotment Associations (ODFAA) negotiates with OCC on behalf of all Oxford's allotments. Wendy has been very active in this process and will be available in the background so that her wealth of knowledge is not abruptly lost, and CMAA's new committee will also continue to engage.

At the moment, CMAA is effectively a private club overseen by trustees. CMAA does not exist as a legal body in its own right, so the trustees themselves would be in the firing line if the Association were to be sued. As we reported in newsletters, the onerous nature of modern volunteering means that few individuals are willing to take on the role of trustee any more. Any allotment association trustee signing the new lease with OCC would be individually liable over its 21-year duration, even after they stepped down - and their estate liable if they died! The solution is for the Association to become a legal body in its own right (a process called 'incorporation') so that committee members' personal liability is limited.

There are two options for the form of that incorporation. We can either

- register a co-operative society with the Financial Conduct Authority. A co-operative society is a legal entity under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 or
- register a company with Companies House. A company is a legal entity under the Companies Act 2006.

The Committee had initially favoured the co-operative society option. They can be onerous to set up, but membership of the National Allotment Society gave us access to a model document and the offer of sponsorship, that we hoped would simplify and speed up the process and reduce costs. Unfortunately, there have been some complications. Some other Oxford allotments have found the same issues and ODFAA is now hoping to find a way through collectively. Meanwhile, other Oxford allotments are going down the potentially simpler route of becoming a limited company. The arrangements inherent in a co-op can be constructed when setting up a limited company, and, if we went down that road, that's what we'd intend to do.

We think it is worth waiting a bit longer to see what comes out of ODFAA's work with NAS on the co-operative society option, meanwhile we are getting a more detailed understanding of the limited company option.

Becoming incorporated in whichever form will lead to some change in nomenclature and administration. For example, committee members will become directors, our official name will have 'Limited' appended to it and we shall need to ensure we continue to be properly insured in our new form, and we'll need to change our bank account.

The underlying principles would be the same as now though – a democratic organisation with one member, one vote, managed by an elected and accountable group on the organisation’s behalf, keeping proper accounts... Our existing ‘Constitution and Rules’ will need to change – both to comply with the relevant legislation and to fit in with the reviewed Oxford City Council rules coming out of the Lease review. It is essential that the Committee, and then members, have sight of this detail before we put a formal vote to members to adopt the new form. Therefore, at this AGM, we are asking only for agreement in principle that we should become incorporated. Once we have the new constitution and rules, and the new lease, later in the year, we intend to have another General Meeting to take the final decision.

We shall also need to introduce a new clause to our existing Constitution to allow for the dissolution of the current, unincorporated, Association.

Document Ends