



Grow Community – Sopwell 5th Annual General Meeting Minutes

7.30pm, 22nd September 2025

Cottonmill Community and Cycling Centre, Old Oak, off Cottonmill Lane, AL1 2EF

Attendees:

Kate Swindells KS
Jo Cooney JC
Rachel Baker RB
Nelly Cronier-Mackie NCM
Hamid El Bouchikhi ELM
Gail Jackson GJ
Mantee Sobha MS
Deborah Hall DH
Anne Cowan AC
Lee Wood LW

Theresa Frame TF
Jesus Pastor JP
Janet Knott JK
Valerie Rodriguez VR
Carol Prowse CP
Peter Ryan PR
Michelle Hart MH
Alison Shipperlee AS
Liz Hunt LH

Apologies:

Sonya Jefferson SJ
Sandy Norman SN

Minutes

| <u>Agenda Item</u> | | <u>Action</u> | <u>Responsible</u> |
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| Refreshments | Grow Community – Sopwell provided refreshments from 7pm. Thank you to Hamid for his lovely fragrant platter of home grown produce (including fresh goji berries and banana leaves!), and to everyone else who provided cake, biscuits and drinks. | | |
| 1. Welcome, apologies for absence and introduction (KS) including approval of 2024 AGM minutes | <p>KS welcomed everyone and thanked them for coming; it was lovely to see some new faces among the known. She ran through housekeeping (toilets and fire procedures).</p> <p>Apologies were given from Lee Wood (arrived part way through), Sonya Jefferson, and Sandy Norman.</p> <p>RB proposed the AGM minutes from 2024 and NCM seconded. The 2024 AGM minutes were passed.</p> | | |
| 2. Annual report a) Overview | <p>KS presented a report of Grow Community – Sopwell's year so far:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Grow Community – Sopwell</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Annual Report August 2024– June 2025</p> <p>Grow Community – Sopwell has continued to support local food growing, wildlife, and community connection through volunteer-led activities and events.</p> <p>Key Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community Gardening:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Weekly sessions at Berners Drive Community Garden maintained seasonal crops and supported biodiversity. | | |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The mini-meadow at Martyr Close attracted pollinators and was regularly maintained. ○ Abbots Avenue planters and the Cottonmill Centre orchard and grove were regularly maintained, and we supported growing with partners in the raised bed planters ● Food Sharing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Free produce, seeds and seedlings were offered at sharing tables and seed stalls. ○ Seed potatoes donated by Ayletts Nursery, were distributed to Year 4 students at all three primary schools in Sopwell ● Events: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ We hosted our regular events: Annual Open Garden Day and Winter wreath workshop. ○ We also attended local festivals: Cottonmill Gathering and Autumn Festival ● Partnerships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ With schools and youth groups we supported hands-on learning and growing ● Online Engagement: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Regular Facebook posts shared gardening tips, wildlife sightings, and invitations to events. We promoted food growing and sharing to build cohesion and improve food security. ○ <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increased local participation in growing and sharing food ● Strengthened neighbourhood connections | | |
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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supported urban wildlife and sustainable practices <p>Supported by St Albans City and District Council, Hertfordshire County Council, local organisations and donors, we remain committed to building a resilient, connected community.</p> <p>Grow Community – Sopwell Team</p> | | |
| b) Wildlife | <p>LW sent his apologies but sent an update about the fantastic abundance of wildlife that's been seen at Berners Drive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meadow Brown Peacock Small Tortoiseshell Large White Red Admiral Orange Tip Brimstone. Cabbage white Green veined white Gatekeeper Holly Blue Mint moth Tiger moth Orange swift moth Burnett moth Swallow tailed moth Pale tussock White plume moth Slowworm Alder leaf beetle Shield beetle | | |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Click beetle • Ground beetle • Red admiral beetle • Six-spotted ladybird • Grooved leaf beetle • Great diving beetle • Spotted longhorn beetle • Pipestrelle bat • Signs of fox • Signs of mouse | | |
| c) Mini-meadow | <p>SJ also sent her apologies and an update of progress at the mini-meadow at Martyr's Close:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Mini-meadow Update</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Sonya Jefferson</p> <p>As you know John O'Conner mowed down the mini meadow last August for the second time - so this is the third year of year one growing. Because they thought it was an established meadow they were reluctant to do the work that needed doing but with the help of our local councillors we managed to convince them that they needed to rotovate the area and plant it with seed. They also agreed to do some community engagement work.</p> <p>Due to the cables etc under the meadow land we decided that the end towards Holyrood Crescent would be rotorvated and the end, after the pine tree, near Martyr Close would be left.</p> <p>After rotavating JoC spread seeds, these were not raked in so the local birds had a great picnic. The wonderful Michelle McKenzie was witness to this and tried her best to rake them in but unfortunately not a lot bloomed this year. When I saw it</p> | | |

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| | <p>was mostly coming back as grass I put down a bit more seed, including yellow rattle, and some seed bombs. It seems it was mostly the seed bombs that bloomed but there were blooms!</p> <p>JoC also had signs installed to let everyone know its a wildflower and nature area and logs have been laid around the perimeter to prevent mowers getting onto the land as, apparently, the last guy who drove on knew he shouldn't but a neighbour asked him to.</p> <p>In the spring myself and one volunteer cut the grass back and since then we have been and trimmed the edges a couple of times but due to the dry weather we haven't had to do it very much. We are hoping to do the next big cut in October as part of a corporate volunteer day.</p> <p>I am borrowing some items from the library of things including a scarifier which we will then use to drop some more native wild-flower seeds.</p> <p>As part of their promise to do community engagement John O'Conner's biodiversity manager (no longer employed) came to do a seed bomb making event as part of the March Sustfest weekend. They asked for the details of the cubs that came to plant the meadow so they could do some work with them but I don't know if they did get in touch with them.</p> | | |
| 3. Financial report (NCM) | <p>NCM and RB gave their report in their role as co-treasurers:</p> <p>Grow Community – Sopwell started with £3000 and got around £715 in income. Just under £1600 was spent over the year, with the largest expenditure on the jigsaw meadow. This leaves £1000 in reserve and just over £1205 available to spend in the year 2025 to 2026.</p> <p>KS noted we don't have any particular plans outside the normal rotation of events and the usual spend on compost and seeds (KS noted that Ayletts have been amazing in sponsoring Grow Community with a £200 gift card in</p> | | |

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| | <p>the years to now).</p> <p>A copy of the financial report is included in Appendix 1.</p> | | |
| 4. Election of Committee Members (KS) | <p>Gail Jackson and Alison Shipperlee have stood down as committee members. The committee thanks them for their work and support over the years.</p> <p>Voting in of the Committee</p> <p>a) Chair: Kate Swindells Proposed: JC Seconded by: RB Vote: passed</p> <p>b) Additional Officers</p> <p>Vice-Chair: no-one stood for VC</p> <p>Treasurer: Nelly Cronier-Mackie Proposed: AS Seconded by: GJ Vote: passed</p> <p>Co-Treasurer: Rachel Baker Proposed: KS Seconded by: DH Vote: passed</p> <p>c) Additional Committee member(s)</p> <p>Trustee: Jo Cooney Proposed: KS</p> | | |

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| | <p>Seconded by: GJ Vote: passed</p> <p>Trustee: Lee Wood Proposed: RB Seconded by: TF Vote: passed</p> <p>Trustee: Liz Hunt Proposed: AS Seconded by: GJ Vote: passed</p> <p>Trustee: Sonya Jefferson Proposed: KS Seconded by: GJ Vote: passed</p> | | |
| 5. Appointment of secretary (in-coming Chair) | KS appointed JC as secretary. | | |
| 6. Guest speaker Hamid El Bouchikhi | <p>Hamid, a Sopwell resident and local plant expert, shared advice on how to successfully grow fruit trees. We were really pleased for him to come and share his expertise in growing amazing produce.</p> <p>He specialises in food production and believes that we can work together to share expertise and show each other how to grow food.</p> <p>Soil, soil, soil Hamid talked of Geoff Lawton and permaculture, and the importance of developing localised, urbanised food production where all your greens can</p> | | |

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| | <p>be recycled within your own gardening system. Everything is based on soil, soil, soil – there is nothing fancy about the method – fix the soil and everything else comes after. For example, goji berries (which have four times the vitamin C of an orange) have been native to the UK since the 12th-14th century, but we don't tend to grow it anymore. Using his methods, Hamid is able to successfully grow them in his garden with some trial and error. For example, he had read an interview with Madonna about goji berries and bought one, but it didn't produce fruit. Expert Geoff Lawton advised that you need a male and female fruit, so once Hamid had sourced a female plant he now gets around three harvests a year.</p> <p>Hamid selects plants for their productivity e.g. suncrest plums variety to help them to be resistant to disease and large karaka blackberries that grow early in the season on a north facing wall.</p> <p>Hamid can produce cuttings for people who want to grow these varieties as he wants people to improve their access to taste and nutrition by growing themselves.</p> <p>Using this method also reduces waste. Hamid's green bin has been empty for the last four years. The general kitchen waste and the natural greenery from the garden can be composted directly (dig a two-hands wide, 50cm deep hole in the ground and layer it with kitchen waste and greens/cardboard boxes, and within 2-3 months, you have a black soil) or indirectly. Hamid confirmed you could put cooked food in, but he noted that rats could be a problem. To reduce this, layer it, and put the food at the bottom. Leave 5-10cm gap of soil, and then plant on top.</p> <p>The main problem is the clay, stony soil in South East Hertfordshire. Charles Dowding has an alternative system that works for him (the no dig), but Hamid has found that the composting at home works for him.</p> <p>Perpetual harvest</p> <p>Hamid has five harvests a year in the same space: tulips, then broad beans</p> | | |
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| | <p>(from Oct/Nov to Apr/May), then garlic and onions or corn, then at the start of Summer courgettes and pumpkins, and fruit trees.</p> <p>He also grows a number of less common produce plants. For example, Hamid showed the audience amaranth, which is popular among the South-East Asian community. You can eat the red leaves and the seeds, which have quite a strong flavour. Hamid put amaranth and poppy seeds with yoghurts and grapes from his garden.</p> <p>Grafting</p> <p>Hamid noted that trees can take 3-4 years for trees to be established. He recommends figs. He espaliers the figs to make it look pretty, and maximise the space in the garden (it also makes it easier to cover with netting to deter birds). He has three trees, a cherry, a pear and a fig. He also uses grafting to maximise how long a tree will produce fruit (tricking a tree into recognising a branch from another tree as its own and growing it). He has eight varieties of pear on one tree, and twelve of plum, which extends the harvest over three months.</p> <p>Hamid does not have a greenhouse, nothing is covered, it is all organic. He controls the size of the fruit through pruning. Now the climate is warming up, there is a change in the trees and shrubs that he can work with: for example, Hamid recommends Desert King figs over the more common Brown Turkey. On the same tree, he also grows White Marseille (a lot of figs but doesn't ripen well) and a Danish fig called Bornholm. Fig trees can reach 5m, but he espaliers the trees to keep them lower and easier to harvest. He has noticed that the White Marseille is faster growing and can take over the tree its grafted to, so he is cutting a lot back this year.</p> <p>He also grows a Japanese pear called White Nashi and, on the same tree, Comice.</p> <p>Growing from seed</p> | | |
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| | <p>You can grow fruit from seeds. Hamid has grown an apple tree from seed. It takes seven years to produce an apple. He chose the fruit for its colour (a Red William or Red Delicious). Hamid grew nectarines, and peaches and nectarines took three years to produce fruit. Peaches and nectarines can suffer from curl leaf disease, but the one grown from seed did not, which Hamid thinks is due to its better acclimatisation. He has also imported a peach tree from Canada called Inka, which is frost hardy.</p> <p>LH asked about a sapling that was growing up from her neighbour's apple tree, and what she should do with it. Hamid said it may be the stock root, which the apple would have been grafted onto, and therefore wouldn't be a good fruit tree without grafting.</p> <p>JP noted he has a ten year old apple tree that is growing at a severe angle. Hamid noted that without seeing the tree in person, his advice would be to straighten it by cutting the tree to a metre from the ground at the height or dormancy (mid-winter); cover the cut with a handful of mud or something similar. The new growth will shoot up naturally. The other (less favoured) option is to support it under the trunk (like a large fig tree in Islington).</p> <p>Hamid has managed to grow grapes, including a seedless variety (which ripens slightly later than his others). His varieties include a Japanese kyoho, which he grows for the size but not the taste (it turns out you have to peel them before eating)! Hamid noted that he cannot graft grapes except the kyoho.</p> <p>Hamid explained that he takes cutting from other trees in the neighbourhood e.g. a cypress giant fig. He noted that there are several ways you can graft. You should do it at Spring or mid-Summer, depending on the tree. In these two seasons, you need to choose a particular graft that will suit the mother tree (although some species are easier to graft than others, e.g. cherries are difficult. All pears are grafted into a quince, and many plums onto a St Julien rootstock). The trick of the graft is to align the line of the bark around the branch with the bark of the mother tree. Hamid offered to do a grafting</p> | | |
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| | <p>workshop at the right time of year (Spring). For interest, Hamid noted on Blue Peter, there was a man who grafted up to 250 varieties onto one tree. For plums, he recommends Victoria plums as a multi-purpose fruit. The first crop tends to have a problem with apple worms but the second is normally fine. Hamid also grows other varieties including Black Claude and Sweet Round.</p> <p>Unusual plants He has a cold, hardy banana tree from Japan. The leaves die back in Winter and he covers it with a heavy mulch, for a strong growth in the Spring. In the South of England, we are in Zone 9B, where we can grow citrus and grow oranges and lemons in the open. Hamid has a walnut that grows well, but wants to grow an early producing chandler walnut. He has a Pakistani mulberry, which has longer fruits. It thrives well in the open. He encourages people to experiment with different plants in the garden. The ones he's sharing here are ones that he has proven to work.</p> <p>Thanks to Hamid for his incredibly interesting talk!</p> | | |
| 8. AOB (in-coming Chair) | There was no other business. | | |
| | Thank you to all who attended! We look forward to seeing you across our upcoming events over the next year. | | |

Appendix 1: Financial report

Grow Community - Sopwell Accounts August 2024 - June 25

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| Starting position | £3,069.16 |
| <u>Income</u> | |
| Events & Activities | £515.30 |
| Ayletts Gift card | £200.00 |
| Total Income | £715.30 |
| <u>Expenditure</u> | |
| Equipment | |
| Consumables | £531.70 |
| Event Hall Hire | £137.13 |
| Event Fees | £40.95 |
| Seeds & Plants | £154.89 |
| Training | |
| Promotion | £242.74 |
| Insurance, Subscriptions & | |
| Memberships | £242.20 |
| Operating costs (bank/web/DBS) | £62.40 |
| Ayletts Gift card | £167.38 |
| Total Expenditure | £1,579.39 |
| Net Profit / (Loss) | -£864.09 |
| Closing balance | £2,205.07 |
| Bank Account Balance | £2,172.45 |
| Ayletts Gift Card Balance | £32.62 |
| Reserves | £1,000.00 |
| Available Balance | £1,205.07 |