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Campaigners 'dig in' in allotment battle

EXCLUSIVE by Mike Lewis

A GROUP campaigning for allotments in the Aberaeron area have vowed to "dig in" following a long-running dispute with the National Trust.

Aeron Vale Allotments Trust says its repeated requests to use land on the Llanerchaeron estate have been blocked by manager Paul Boland.

Chairman Gwilym ab Ioan said that, despite discussions with Trust director-general, Dame Helen Ghosh, the group had "hit a brick wall".

He added: "We suspect that, although it must be apparent to them that our requests are genuine and reasonable, they seem reluctant to be seen as going against the decision of their local manager."

"Mr Boland, right at the outset, made his stand on the matter clear to us when he told us that, although he had nothing against allotments per se, he would not allow them in his backyard under any circumstances."

"This is about far more than advocating a healthy, outdoor lifestyle - we would also like to address the problem of elderly people who don't have the resources to access fresh or organic vegetables."

Mr Boland said they were "fully supportive" of the appropriate development of allotments.

→ Story continues on page 3

www.cambrian-news.co.uk Thursday 30 June 2016 3

Allotment dispute

Story continued from page one

Allotments trust treasurer Stephen Parry said the group felt guilty for failing to meet the expectations of local people.

"We're always being asked whether we've found a plot," he said.

"One person who spoke to me was actually in tears over it."

Mr ab Ioan maintained that "the latest two-acre field that we requested is disused, overgrown and has not formed part of the NT's activities for a number of years".

It is the latest in a long line of obstacles encountered by the allotments trust since its formation in 2011, members say.

"We have approached, and had discussions with, no fewer than 15 individual land-owners in the immediate area; both within, and on the outskirts of Aberaeron town," revealed Mr ab Ioan.

"We have not been able to acquire any suitable sites. Where land has been available, it is not suitable for fruit and vegetable cultivation."

"We have viewed land as far afield as Llanon, and we have been in discussions with the National Trust at Llanerchaeron, off and on, since the end of 2011."

In desperation, the allotments trust has drawn up a 25-signature petition under the Smallholdings and Allotments Act which states local authorities have a mandatory obligation to provide suitable land if there is sufficient demand to cultivate food crops.

Aberaeron Town Council has backed the petition, which has now been forwarded to Ceredigion County Council.

"Yes, it's been very frustrating, but we're not going to give up," said Mr Parry.

"They say that if you keep tapping a stone long enough eventually it will crack."

Mr Boland said: "This would follow a proper consideration of the impact of any proposal on a range of legal, planning and environmental issues before any land is released for these purposes."

"However, the allotment requests made in recent years by Aeron Vale Allotments did not meet the criteria that we adopt in this due diligence process and this was communicated to them."