

# **State of the Market Survey 2020**

## Local Authority Allotment Services



Briefing 20-79  
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The state of the market survey was conducted by Wayne Priestley, APSE Principal Advisor for Environmental services.

For any enquires in relation to the survey, Wayne may be contacted on: Tel: 0161 772 1810

Email: [wpriestley@apse.org.uk](mailto:wpriestley@apse.org.uk)



**Association for Public Service Excellence**

3rd Floor, Trafford House  
Chester Road, Old Trafford  
Manchester M32 0RS

Telephone: 0161 772 1810

Fax: 0161 772 1811

Email: [enquiries@apse.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@apse.org.uk)

Web: [www.apse.org.uk](http://www.apse.org.uk)

# Local Authority Allotment Services

## State of the Market 2020

APSE conducted an online allotment survey in September 2020. This follows on from a series of previous surveys which were conducted in 2019, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2013, 2012, 2010 and 2008. The 2020 survey asks similar questions to the previous surveys in order to allow for comparisons to be drawn from previous years but also included some new questions with regard to demand and use of allotments during the COVID-19 health pandemic UK 'lockdown' period. In total, over 80 responses were received from local authorities throughout the UK. This report identifies the key findings and offers further analysis about the use of allotments and their value to communities particularly during times of wellbeing needs.

## Results from the survey

The following summarises responses to a series of questions on the numbers, types and demand for allotments. The total number of respondent councils is 87 which compares well with previous years data, based on surveys of similar respondent numbers.

### Number and management of allotments

When asked about the management of allotments 96% of respondents answered that they have council owned allotments within their authority which is a rise of 2% from the 2019 survey which may suggest some new allotment sites have been built or transferred back to local authority control.

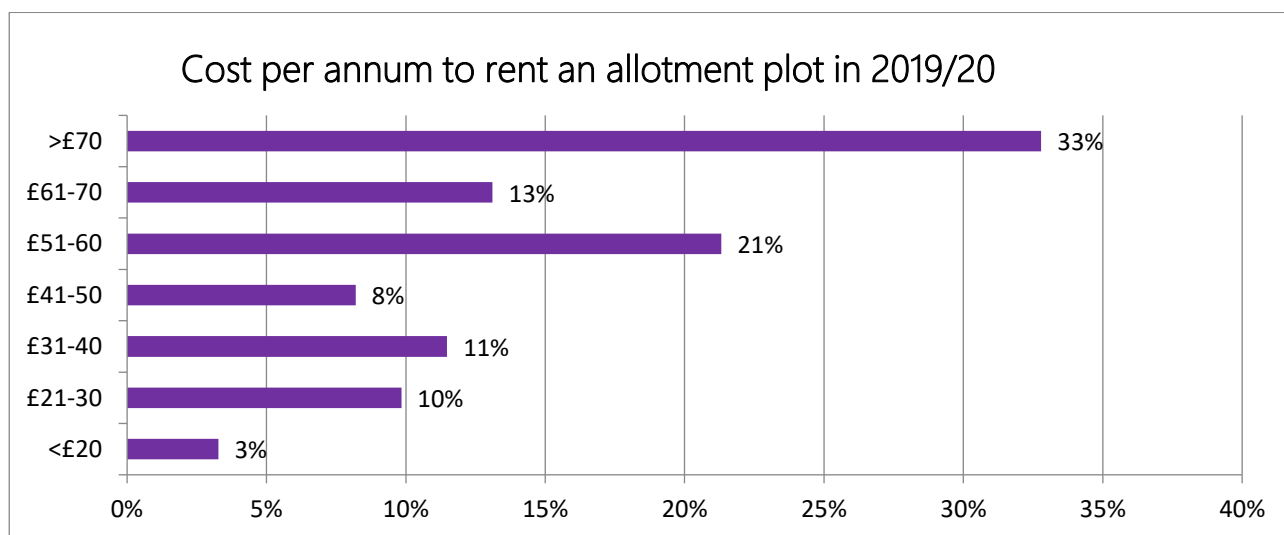
In terms of management of the allotments, 34% answered that they have allotments which are directly managed by a council officer, which is a rise of 13% on last year's results, only 9% stated that allotment sites are managed through a site committee/association (a 10% decrease on 2019). 57% of respondents stated that they have a mix of council and site committee/association managed sites, which is a 3% fall on last year's survey results, suggesting that although the main management approach to allotment sites appears to be a joint council and site committee approach, there is a growing number of sites which have fallen back into full council management.

Results also showed that almost 25% of respondents who do not currently manage sites had received requests for new allotment provision, suggesting that the length of waiting for current plots is driving people to request new site provision rather than wait. In Scotland, Part 9 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 places a statutory obligation on local authorities to provide additional allotments when specific triggers are activated. Here local authorities have indicated they will be delivering these by reassessing their current sites to look at realignment and potential expansion, identifying new potential sites on Local Authority land, working with their

landowners such as Housing Association, Faith Groups, Educational establishments and others to encourage and support them to provide allotments in areas of demand and supporting emerging community groups to seek to develop sites too.

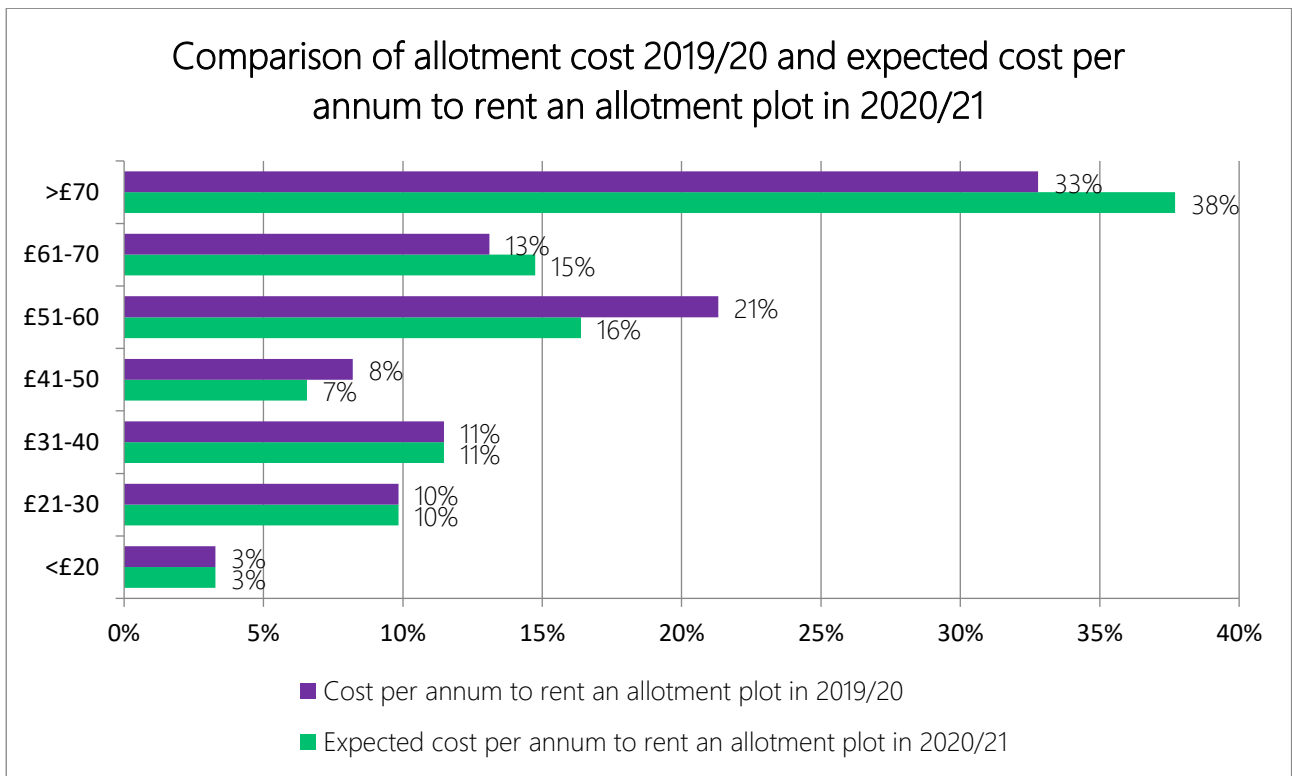
## Cost of allotments

The chart below shows there was a wide range of prices for renting allotments, but the largest proportion of local authorities now charge over £70 per annum to rent an allotment in 2019-20, with almost 70% charging more than £50. The fact there is a wide variety of charges below this figure suggests size and facilities may have a part to play (half-plots etc.), but it is noticeable most local authorities are now implementing charges which may at least cover the cost of maintenance rather than subsidising the allotment service which for many, would have been the previous practice.



The survey asked about the expected increases in the rent of an allotment plot in 2020/21 as compared to 2019/20. It appears that there is likely to be little change in allotment cost, However, 5% more site managers will be charging £70 or over than currently.

The chart below shows the expected levels of increase in 2019/20.



The majority of respondents (69%), replied that the cost for an allotment is directly related to the area of the allotment (e.g. square metres) whilst 13% stated that the charge is standard regardless of the size. These figures show that the size of an allotment is still the determining factor for charging criteria. With regards to levels of increased costs, 30% of respondents stated they had increased allotment costs above the standard level of inflation which is a rise of 9% on 2017, when 21% stated their increases were above the level of inflation.

In 2020, 22% of respondents now state that they will be continuing to increase allotment costs over the next five years, compared to 34% in 2019, and a further 47% replied that they were currently reviewing allotment costs. The fall in respondents intending to increase costs over the next 5 years could be a reflection of allotment holder pressure to prevent further price increases.

Despite these increases only 36% reported that the provision of allotments would become cost neutral as a result of their charges. This is in fact a 7% increase on 2019 figures. So it does appear that price increases to allotment holders has seen an increase in some local authorities achieving break-even on providing allotments. However, 62% said that they would still need to subsidise the cost of allotment provision and only 2% said they would make a profit.

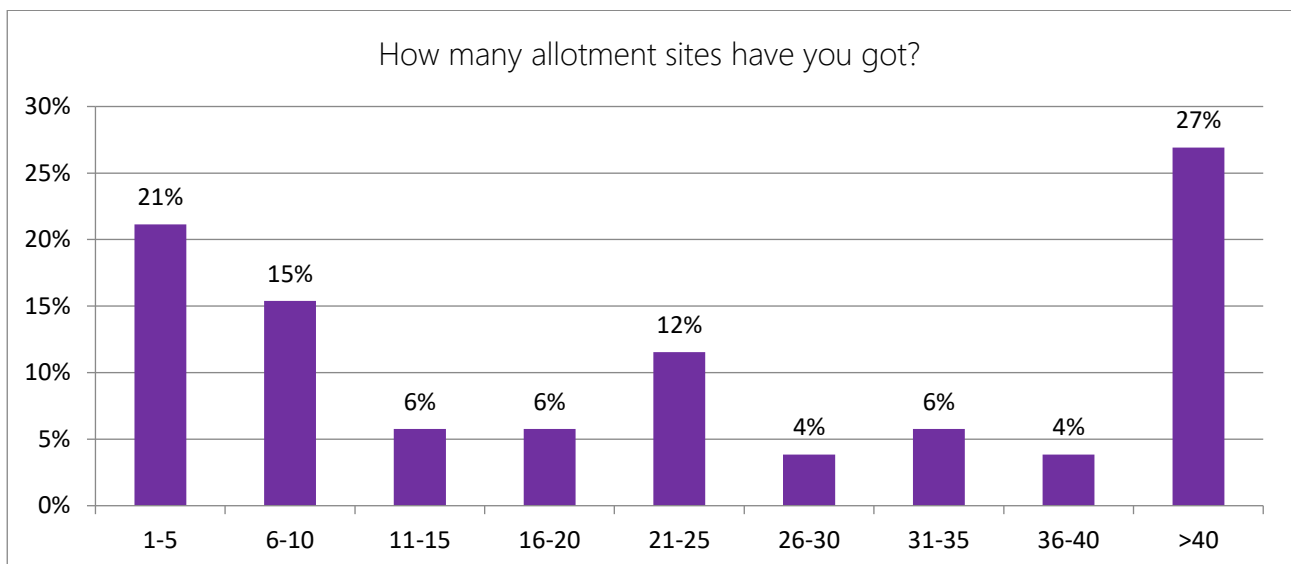
There was a split in the respondents who offered concessionary prices. 51% reported that they did offer concessions which is a fall of 10% on 2019, whilst correspondingly there has been an increase in those who no longer offer concessions from 39% in 2019, to 49% in 2020.

For those who do offer concessions, the breakdown is as follows:

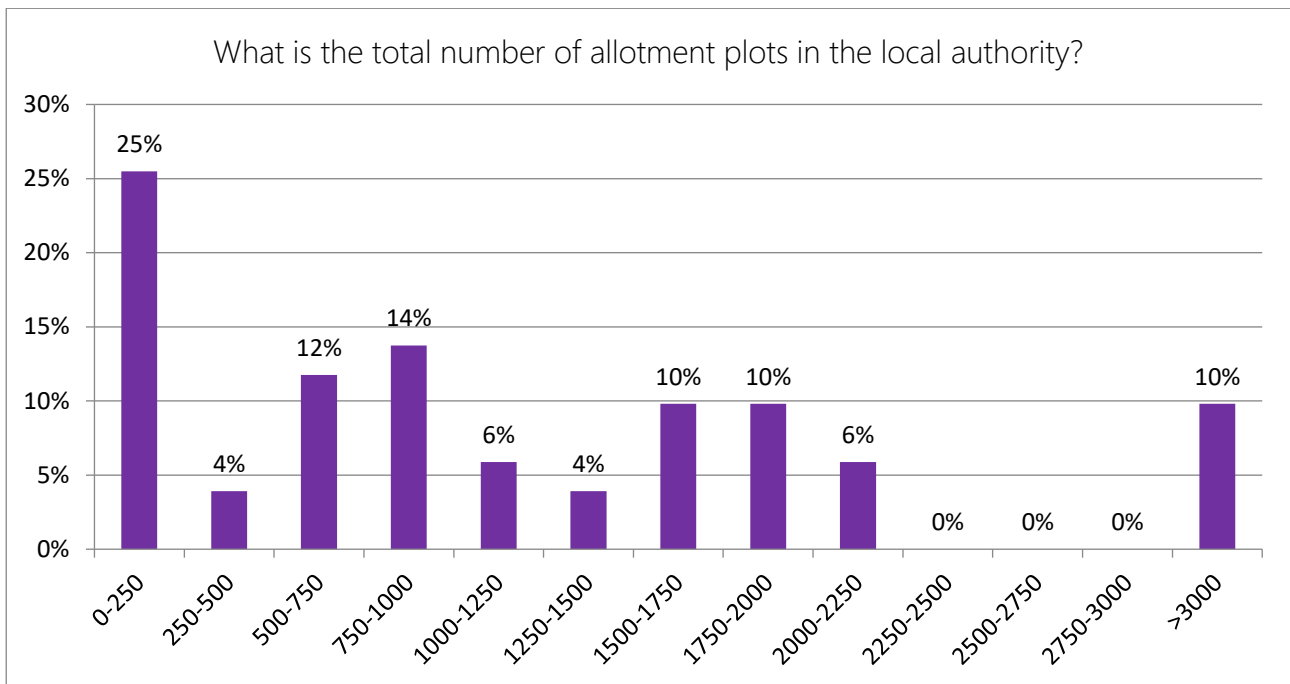
- 73% offer discounts for pensioners, over 60's and/or retired people, a fall from 88% in 2019. The majority of these offer a 40-50% discount.
- 60% offer discounts to the unemployed or those on income support. The majority of these offer a 40-50% discount.
- 46% offer discounts to people with disabilities. The majority offer a 40-50% discount.
- 34% offer discounts to students. Of these, the majority offer a discount of 20-30%.

## Number and size of allotments

Regarding the number of allotment sites per authority, the chart below shows the results of the survey's findings. What is noticeable is that compared to 2019 there has been increases in the number of respondents stating they have increased the number of sites they operate in the 1-5 site and >40 site categories.



Linked to the number of sites per authority is the actual number of plots available. The chart below shows the number of actual plots available. The results show there have been increases in most categories which could reflect either increases in site numbers or new plots. A further possibility is some local authorities are now reconfiguring sites and creating more half plots which again could lead to increases in plot numbers.



In terms of the size of plots available, 45% stated that they have a standard size for a plot, and out of these, the most common sizes were: 250-299 square metres (35%), 100-149 square metres (23%) and 200-249 square metres (21%).

The reporting of waiting lists show the demand for allotments is still high, with 65% of respondents having 100-400 people in the waiting list for an allotment compared to 69% in 2019 which shows a slight improvement. The most significant change has been that 20% of respondents stated that they had over 1000 people on the waiting list compared to only 8% in 2019.

The majority of respondents (90%) stated that the waiting list is regularly updated (e.g. names of people who are no longer interested or those who have moved are removed).

With regards to average waiting time for an allotment plot, over 66% stated that over 18 months was the average, which is a rise of 17% on 2019 when the figure was 49%. 4% of respondents could guarantee a plot within 6 months and only 6% of respondents could offer an allotment plot within 3 months.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that 71% of respondents stated that new tenancies are restricted to people living within the local authority area.

## Future increases in the number of allotments

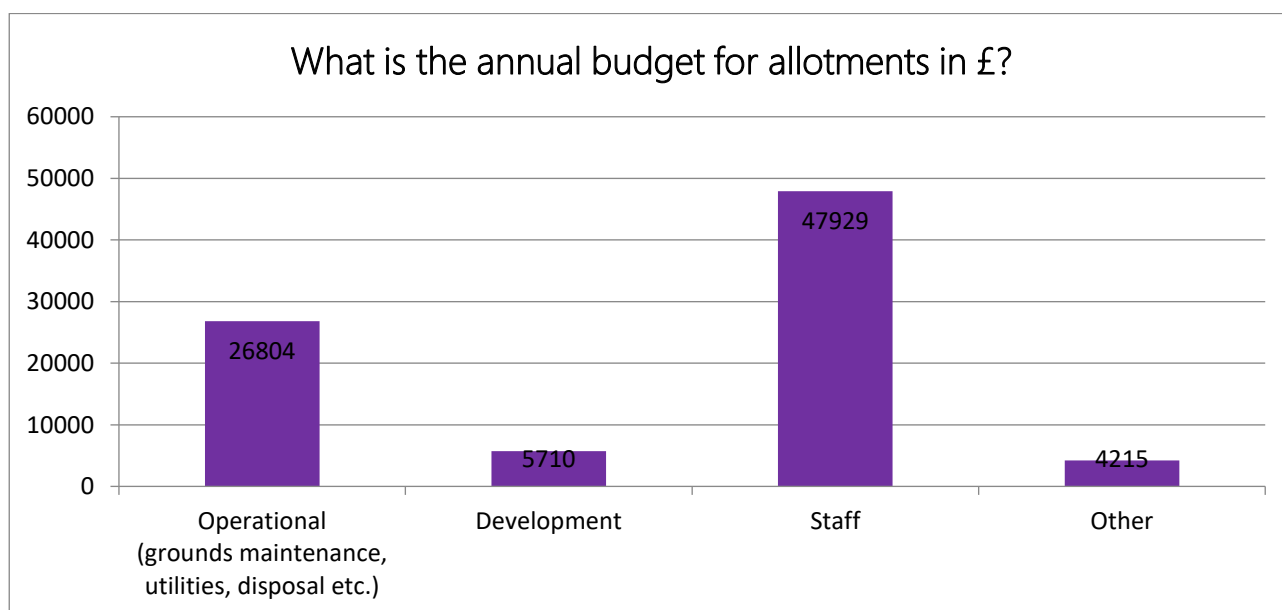
31% of respondents stated that their council plans to increase the number of allotments as opposed to 27% in 2019. From those respondents who stated that the number of allotments is planned to increase, the method of doing this is shown in the table below:

<b>Direct provision by the council for additional plots</b>	69%
<b>Provision by builders/developers as part of a housing/planning policy</b>	50%
<b>Provision by community groups supported/facilitated by council</b>	44%
<b>Provision by other council departments (e.g. Education, Social Work) as part of a healthy lifestyles/eco-schools/health type project</b>	13%
<b>Other</b>	19%

What is noticeable is that the provision by local authorities has increased as has the provision by builders and developers. Provision by community groups has remained at the same level but again provision by other council department as part of health and well-being projects has increased noticeably. It therefore does appear that councils are now taking a much more proactive role in providing new allotment sites and plots.

## Budget for allotments

The average annual budgets for allotments were stated as follows:

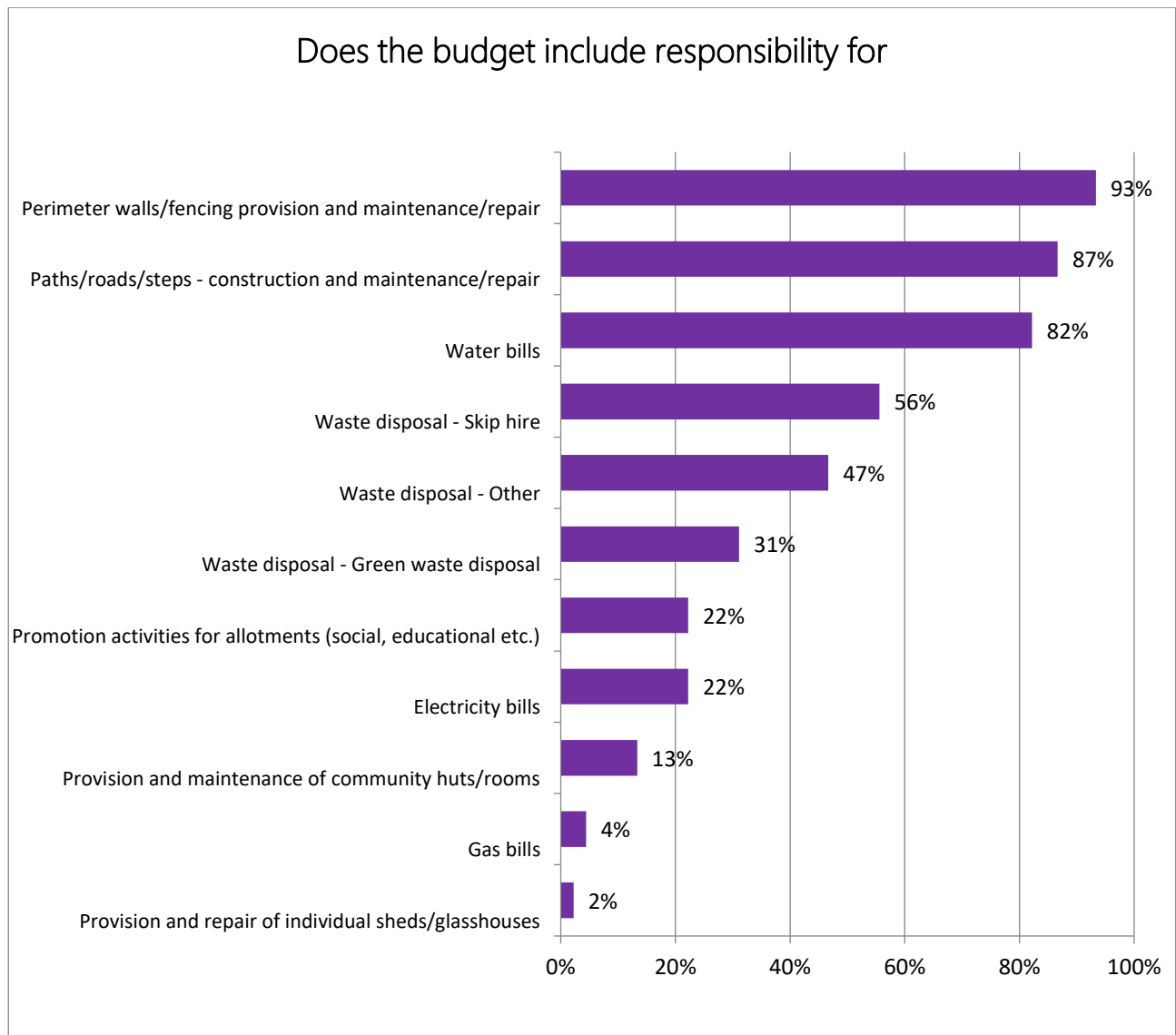


These figures show an increase in all costs against 2019 apart from the 'other costs' category where there has been a significant decrease, probably resulting from the more accurate apportionment of costs across the other three cost areas. However when we compare the average



cost reported for 2019 and 2020 across these four cost areas it shows that there has been an 1% increase in cost/investment.

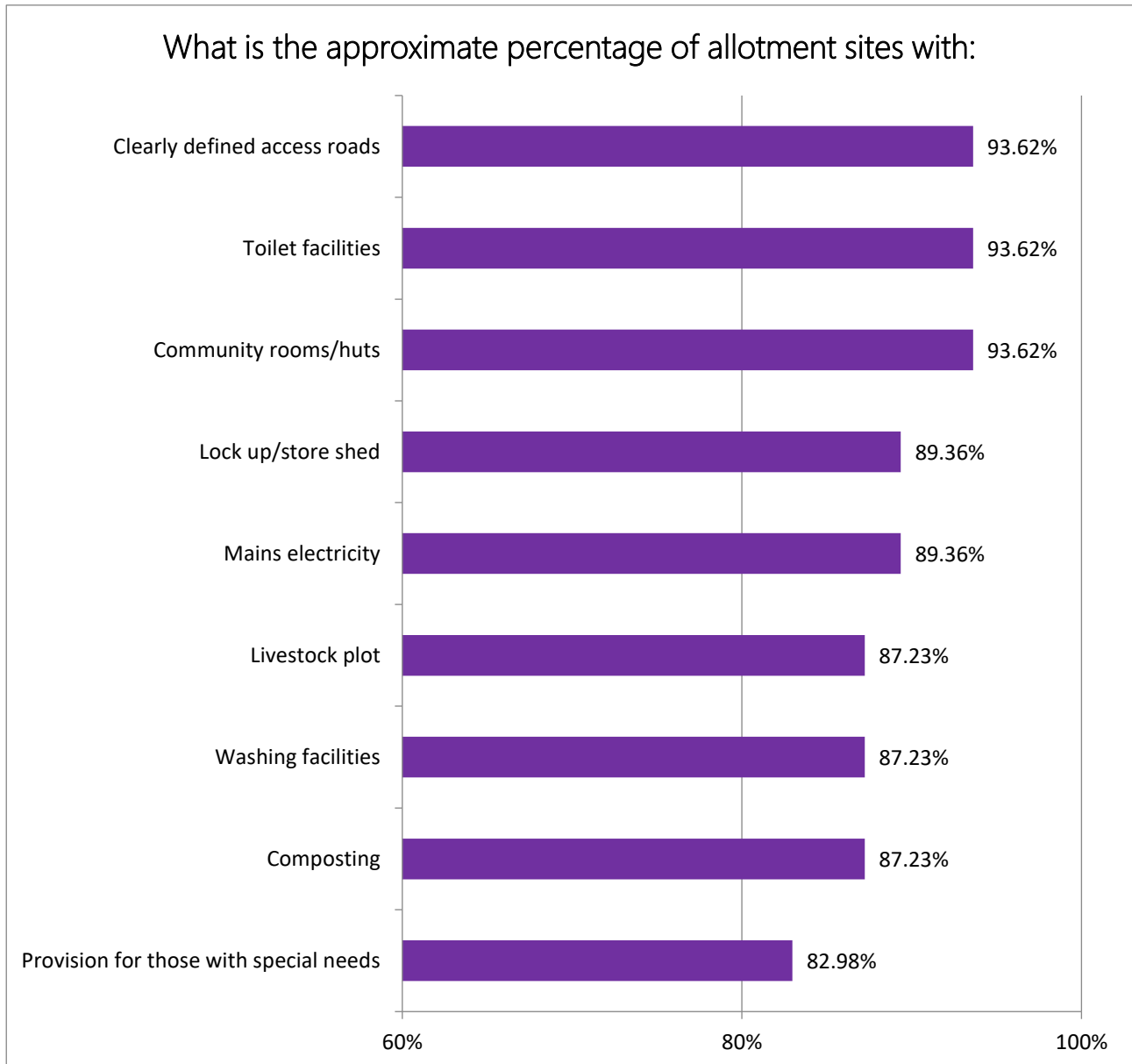
Respondents stated that their budget includes responsibility for the following:



It is again noticeable from the figures that there continues to be a council responsibility for infrastructure (paths, walls, fencing, community buildings etc.) Possibly many of these costs are no longer able to be borne by allotment associations even where sites are jointly managed as income from rents are not sufficient to cover expensive works often associated with infrastructure maintenance/improvements. However, allotment holders do appear to be taking a greater responsibility for water, electricity and waste removal bills as these are areas where they can take personal control through improved water efficiency, energy use and carrying out the recycling and composting of green waste.

## Facilities at allotment sites

Most allotment sites provide water, fencing, clearly defined access roads and composting. Some allotment sites have other services such as livestock plots, community rooms, lock up/store sheds, washing facilities and toilet facilities. The full breakdown in terms of the average percentage of allotment sites with 'other facilities' is as follows:



There have been significant increases across all of these areas since 2020, particularly with regards to the increased provision of mains electricity, water and toilet and washing facilities. Livestock plots have also increased significantly.

Welcomingly we have seen an increase on allotment sites (from 28% in 2019 to 83% in 2020) where provision is made for people with special needs.

More sites (87%) now carry out composting. This clearly shows sites taking more responsibility for managing their waste in not only, a more environmentally sustainably manner, but also reducing the financial costs of waste disposal.

Regarding site maintenance, there seems to be a shift from one of a joint responsibility between councils and allotment holders to more of a heavier reliance upon plot holders and volunteers. In 2019 only 12% reported plot holders were involved in site maintenance, in 2020 this has risen to 52%.

The full responses are as follows:

<b>As an integral part of grounds maintenance operations/contracts</b>	<b>65%</b>
<b>By the plot holders/site association</b>	<b>52%</b>
<b>By volunteers</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>By a dedicated allotments team/person</b>	<b>13%</b>
<b>As part of rehabilitation programmes (health, offenders etc.)</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>No grounds maintenance is carried out on the sites</b>	<b>2%</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>13%</b>

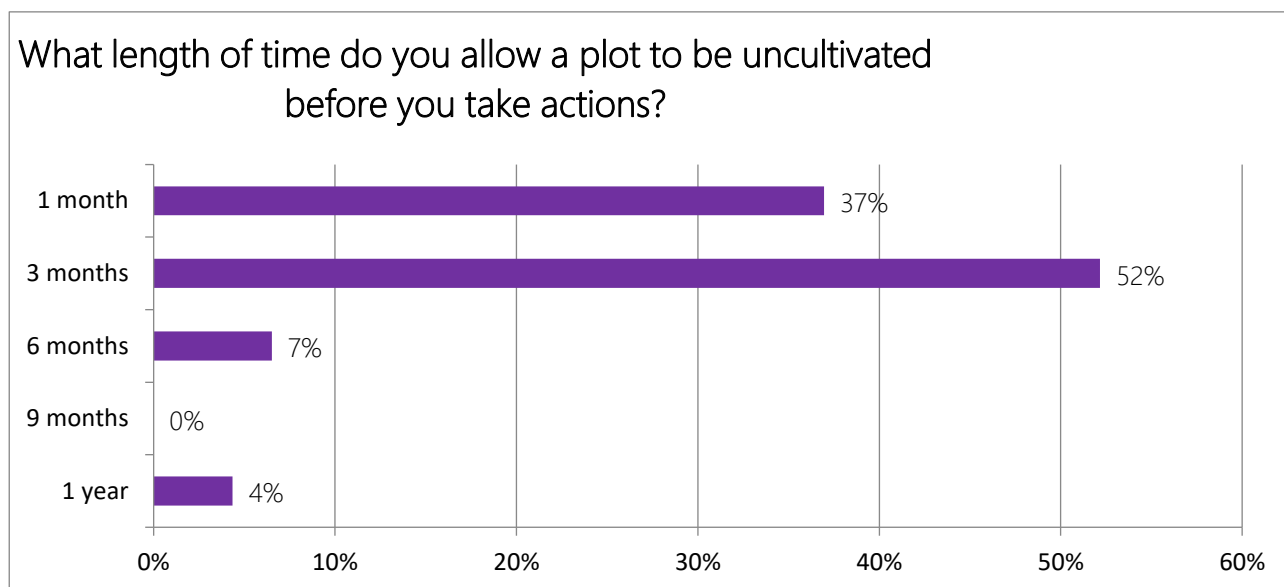
(Please note, respondents could choose more than one option on the survey for this answer).

## **Monitoring allotments**

When asked how grounds maintenance is monitored, the majority stated that this is through inspections/site visits by an allotment officer (66%). Other responses included a council officer (38%) or a site representative (34%). This method of monitoring sites has varied little over the past few years, however this year it is noticeable that most inspections are now being carried out by dedicated allotment officers, perhaps suggesting due to the high demand for plots the actual monitoring is important to ensure all plots are being regularly used and absentee plot holding is avoided.

The survey asked how cultivation standards are monitored and the responses varied a great deal with some monitoring monthly whilst others only monitored when a problem was reported. These monitoring visits were carried out either by council officers, jointly with site representatives or on a daily basis by allotment holders themselves. Inspections may become more frequent during the height of the growing season.

When asked what time was allowed before action was taken on uncultivated plots to be brought back into use, the following chart shows the results of the answers received.



The only real change since 2019 is that there has been a decline in those reporting that they now only allow one month before action is taken on uncultivated plots, 37% in 2020 as opposed to 42% in 2019.

The majority of respondents now allow plots to be uncultivated for 3 months (52%) before they take action.

Notice procedures for tenants who fail to cultivate their plots vary from authority to authority, but are generally around 28-30 days' notice with an initial warning letter followed by an inspection; if no action to cultivate the plot has been taken after a defined period of time, either a termination of tenancy is undertaken or the plot-holder is put onto a probationary period.

Many respondents allow plot holders to have more than one plot, but this is subject to:

- Historical plots (i.e. those who had several plots can keep them, but new tenants are not allowed more than one plot)
- Waiting lists (tenants can have more than one if there are no waiting lists)
- Time limits (tenants can have extra plots on a year-to-year basis, subject to waiting lists)
- Household limits (where tenants are allowed more than one plot, but the amount each household can have is limited)
- Plot size (yes, but they are limited to a restricted amount of square metres)

40% of respondents restrict plot ownership to a person or a household and 31% of respondents allow plots to be passed on to families and friends. 77% of respondents have considered reducing

future plot sizes to create more plots. 21% of respondents stated that plot-holders are required to undertake a probationary period to ensure they can manage their plot effectively.

52% of respondents stated their authority has a policy in place for handling disputes between its tenants and 61% have a policy in place for handling appeals against notices to quit. 66% of respondents stated that their authority requires their self-managed sites to have policies in place to address the issues above. This is a rise of 9% on 2018 figures, which suggests problems may have occurred without such a policy and this is now being addressed.

## Security

Plot-holders themselves generally manage the security on allotment sites (62%) with 45% of respondents stating that they don't actively manage security. 9% stated that they have a 'plot watch' scheme or something similar. The major change in 2020 has been the fact that no respondent said they now involve park rangers or community wardens in being involved in allotment security.

Comments from respondents included that they have lockable gates (some with a suite of security locks and keys that can't be cut by tenants), temporary CCTV, that community wardens/Police Scotland will respond to hot spots and specific incidents, through developing friendships with local PCSO's they have included allotment sites on their patrols and allotments are now linked to the Council's Community Safety Team. Neighbours also provide an element of passive security.

## Allotment strategy

48% of respondents stated that they have an allotments strategy, a 6% increase on 2019 and of the 52% that haven't currently got a strategy in place, 42% (30% in 2019), stated that the council is planning to develop one within the next 2 years.

34% of Local authorities have a Friends Group/ Forum or similar which is a significant fall on 2019 when 53% reported having such a forum, perhaps reflecting the increasing role local authorities are having in allotment management.

63% of respondents now include allotments into their Local Plans and 58% (a 4% rise on 2019), have the value of allotments recognised within their Health and Well-Being strategies.

## Biodiversity

Biodiversity is being promoted amongst plot-holders in the following ways:

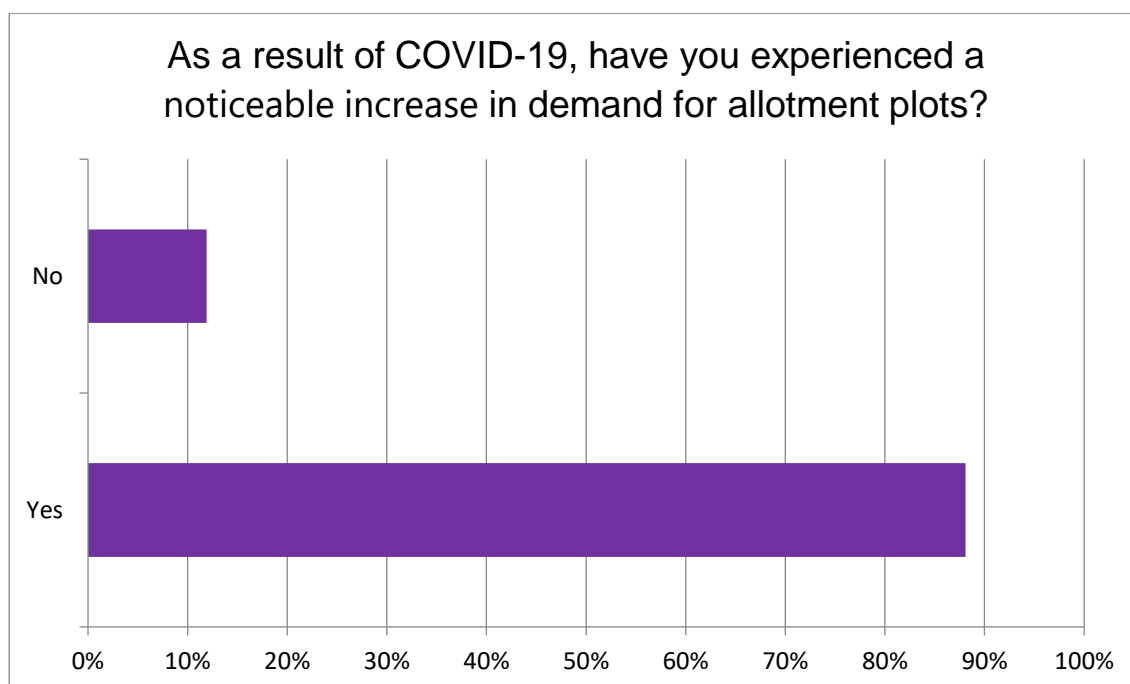
<b>Areas being set aside for wildlife</b>	<b>67%</b>
<b>Information on how to improve biodiversity</b>	<b>52%</b>
<b>Planting pollinator friendly species</b>	<b>45%</b>
<b>Promoting native crops</b>	<b>18%</b>

The setting aside of areas for wildlife has fallen slightly, but as information on biodiversity and planting pollinator friendly crops have both risen, this fall probably reflects the need to use all available land for allotment plots rather than a declining desire to improve opportunities for biodiversity. Other responses in relation to promoting biodiversity. included “encouraging bees by allowing beehives on plots” and “networks of bee keepers”. A growing number of sites are now planting pollinator friendly species to help address the decline in pollinator habitats. Respondents also mentioned that they are having their sites inspected for designation as Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SiNCs).

Respondents stated that environmental sustainability is promoted with regards to site management by adopting water-saving measures such as water butts (93%). 50% stated that they cultivate plots organically and almost 19% of allotment sites have begun to use solar power instead of mains power. Composting green waste is also another popular method of promoting environmental sustainability. One site has introduced a scheme to use natural spring water to make its use of water more sustainable.

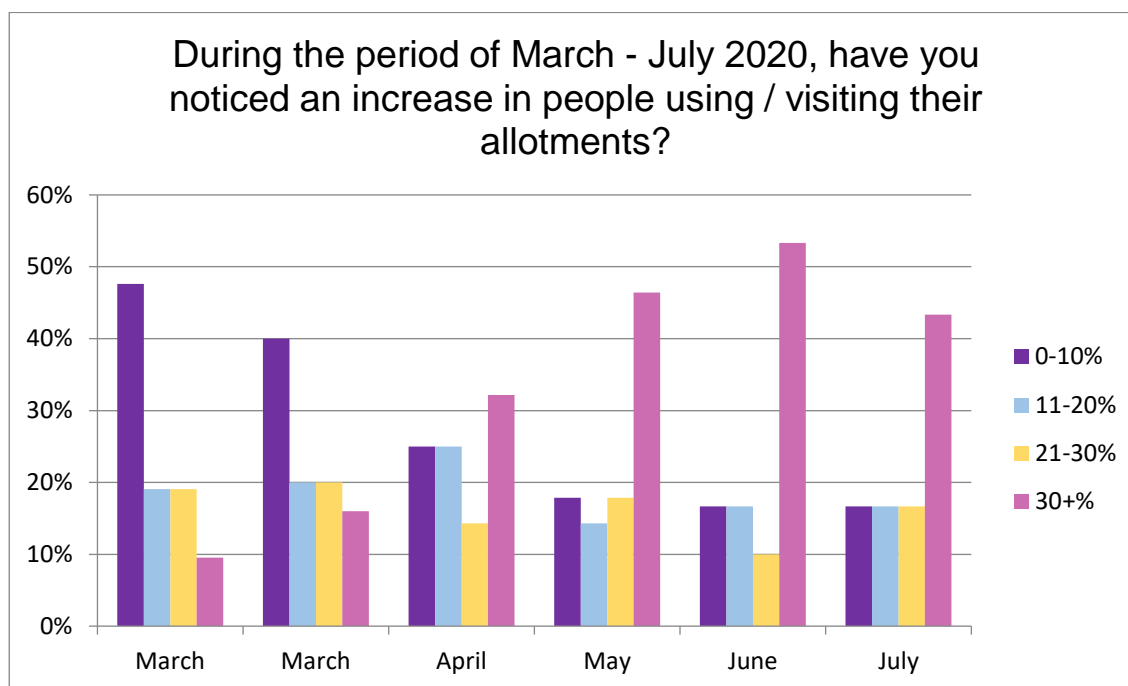
## The Covid-19 impact

Most of the figures contained within the report have been compiled during 2019 and early 2020. However, the timing off the survey has allowed some data to be collected on the impact of Covid-19 upon allotment services. The chart below shows the level of increase for allotment plots during the early stages of national lockdown



The fact almost **90%** of local authorities experienced increase in demand shows the public value and desire to reconnect with nature through the ownership of an allotment plot.

The chart below shows how as the lockdown continued, then the level of visits to allotment increased significantly, showing how much value and reliance the population were placing on their allotments as a way to escape the worries and restrictions of the coronavirus lockdown.



## APSE Comment

This year's standout statistics from the APSE State of the Market on Allotments has to be the fact that almost **90%** of local authorities are reporting an increase in demand for allotments. This alone shows the public value and desire to reconnect with nature through the ownership of an allotment plot. It may also reflect the renewed interest in the public being more self-sustainable, using allotments to grow their own fruit and vegetables. Indeed, the coronavirus pandemic has seen a huge reliance on allotments as places where people are able to go to gain exercise and recreation. So successful have allotments been in meeting this need, that our survey found one authority where demand for plots has increased by as much as 300%.

From the answers received to the survey it is quite clear that it is mainly local authorities which are continuing to provide and manage allotment sites across the UK. However, there has been a slight increase in the number of sites which are now self-managed by allotment holders themselves although still working closely with local authority officers.

The value of allotments is widely recognised across a number of fronts including healthier lifestyles, promoting biodiversity, protecting green spaces, reducing air miles through local food production, providing valuable soakaways in times of heavy rain as well as having a value to pollinators and other wildlife.

The Government's **25 Year Environment Plan** has highlighted the need to use resources from nature more sustainably and efficiently, and ensuring that food is produced sustainably and profitably. Although perhaps looking more at agricultural practices, it can be argued that allotments can help to meet some of the aims of this objective when used to their full potential.

The Environment Plan has also stated as one of its aims to, make sure that there are *'high quality, accessible, natural spaces close to where people live and work, particularly in urban areas, and encouraging more people to spend time in them to benefit their health and wellbeing'*. Again, allotments are excellent examples of how people can interact with their local areas, improve their physical and mental well-being whilst also ensuring the areas green infrastructure is also enhanced and protected. This latter point has been further emphasised as part of a parliamentary Environmental Audit Commission report which has recommended as a response to recurring summer heatwaves that Government *'ensures local authorities and cities have green spaces and heat resilient infrastructure'*. The report goes on to add that, *'Green spaces have proven to reduce the urban heat island effect'* Allotments through careful planting can also contribute to this requirement.

There is also the recognition that if managed in an environmentally-sensitive manner, allotments bring considerable benefits to improving local biodiversity levels. This approach has now become a requirement as The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, has developed proposals to take forwards its desire to build biodiversity net gains into new planning development permissions. These requirements will mean councils will have to produce new spatial 'nature recovery strategies' to support their plan-making duties and allotments will help deliver these objectives.

As well as providing environmental benefits, allotments are also seen as having considerable social cohesion benefits, where all sectors of the local community can engage in a common interest where skills and knowledge can be exchanged and friendships forged.

The allowance by local authorities for allotment holders to manage their own sites should not be seen as them negating their responsibilities. Thankfully this doesn't appear to be the case, as many are now building the importance of allotments into their Health and Well-Being Strategies and also their Local Development Plans. This latter point is evident within the survey where many have reported they are using new developments to provide additional allotment sites.

However, the increasing demand for building land and the lack of plots for new allotments is causing concern amongst allotment holders as is the reductions in council budgets which is having an impact on the ability to maintain such sites. In light of these pressures, many allotment sites are now moving to self-management models, often with the continuing support of the local authority. In this way allotment holders can not only ensure what finance is available is used to meet the known needs of their site, but they are also able to apply for funding which is not available to local authorities.

The concern about local authorities being able to fund the development of new sites has been given some help through partnership working with agencies such as the NHS, who more and more are seeing the therapeutic value of green space and are willing to invest in such facilities. Equally the intergenerational



value of allotments has been recognised as one way which anti-social behaviour can be reduced as different age groups work together and share common experiences.

It is unlikely that local authorities will ever make high levels of income from allotments, indeed many are openly subsidising allotments, but when one considers the multiple benefits they bring, which have only been increased during the current pandemic, then they are acknowledged as being a key community asset and one which local residents, allotment holders and agencies across the country are increasingly helping to sustain.

**Wayne Priestley**  
**Principal Advisor**

## **The Association for Public Service Excellence**

APSE member authorities have access to a wide range of membership resources to assist in delivering council services. This includes our regular advisory groups, specifically designed to bring together elected members, directors, managers and heads of service, together with trade union representatives to discuss service specific issues, innovation and new ways of delivering continuous improvement. The advisory groups are an excellent forum for sharing ideas and discussing topical service issues with colleagues from other councils throughout the UK.

Advisory groups are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE advisory group meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email [enquiries@apse.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@apse.org.uk).

Our national advisory groups include:-

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Local authorities' income generation, trading and commercialisation network

Parks and Horticulture

Renewables and Climate Change

Roads highways and street lighting

Sports and Leisure

Vehicle maintenance and transport

Waste, Refuse and Street scene

If you require any further information on the findings of this State of the Market survey 2020 please contact Wayne Priestley Principal Advisor for Environmental Services at [wpriestley@apse.org.uk](mailto:wpriestley@apse.org.uk)