

State of the Market Survey 2021

Local Authority Allotment Services



Briefing 21-62
December 2021



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

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Local Authority Allotment Services

State of the Market 2021

APSE conducted an online allotment survey in autumn 2021 which follows on from a series of previous surveys which were conducted in 2020, 2019, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2013, 2012, 2010 and 2008. The 2021 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. This report identifies the key findings and offers further analysis about the use of allotments and their value to communities particularly during times of well-being 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 has reduced during 2021, due to the pandemic, but as over 50 councils are represented the survey has statistical validity with regards to its findings.

Number and management of allotments

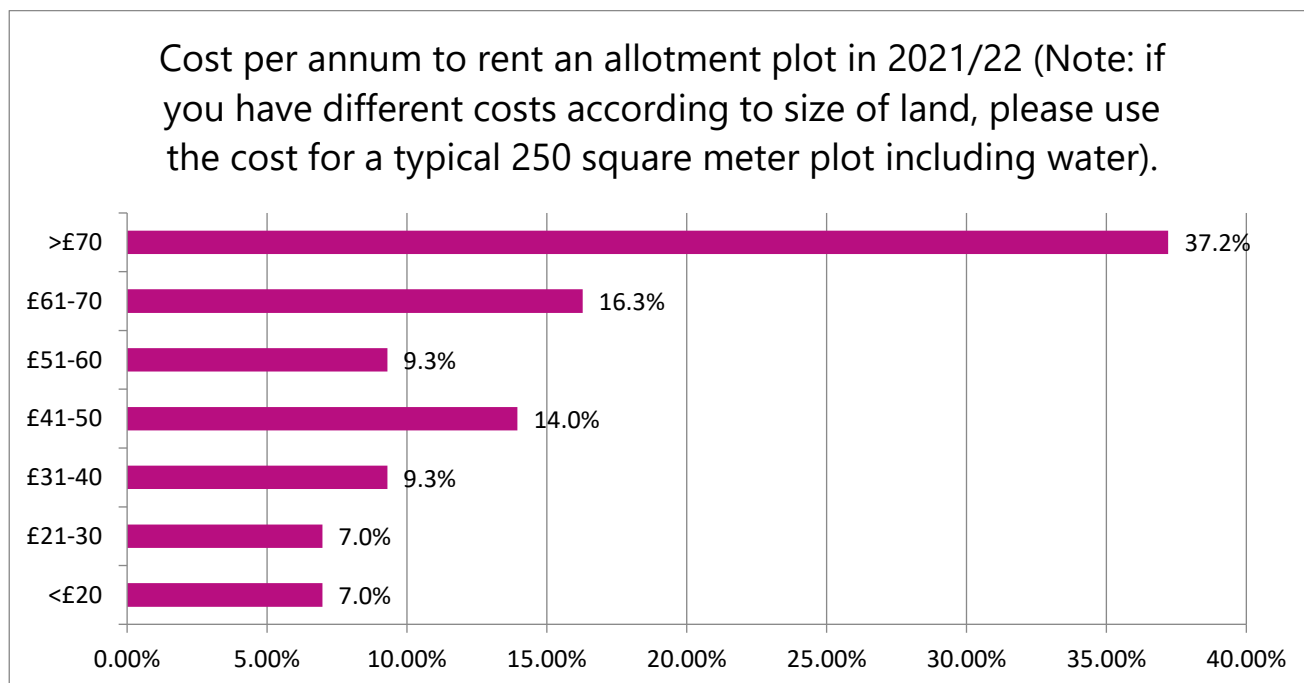
When asked about the management of allotments **100%** of respondents answered that they have council owned allotments within their authority which is a rise of **4%** from the 2020 survey which may suggest some new allotment sites have been built or transferred back to local authority control.

In terms of management of the allotments, **30%** answered that they have allotments which are directly managed by a council officer, which is a fall of **4%** on last year's results, only **7%** stated that allotment sites are managed through a site committee / association (a **2%** decrease on 2020). **63%** of respondents stated that they have a mix of council and site committee / association managed sites, which is a **6%** fall on last year's survey results, suggesting that there has been a growth in a joint management approach to allotment sites.

Results also showed that **32%** of local authority respondents, who **do not** currently manage sites, had received requests for new allotment provision, a **7%** increase on 2020. This suggests that the length of waiting for current plots is driving people to request new site provision, directly from the council, rather than from other current non-council allotment management organisations in their area. 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 2020-21, with over **50%** 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 some local authorities are now implementing charges which may at least cover most of the cost of maintenance rather than totally 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 2021/22 as compared to 2020/21. It appears that there is likely to be little change in allotment cost other than inflationary increases.

The majority of respondents (**74%**), replied that the cost for an allotment is directly related to the area of the allotment (e.g., square metres) whilst **16%** 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, **20%** of respondents stated they had increased allotment costs above the standard level of inflation, which is a fall of **10%** on 2020, when 30% stated their increases were above the level of inflation over the last two years.

In 2020, **33%** of respondents now state that they will be continuing to increase allotment costs over the next five years, compared to **22%** in 2020, and a further **44%** replied that they were currently reviewing allotment costs. The increase in respondents intending to raise costs over the next 5 years could be a reflection of increasing costs of providing more facilities and increased staffing costs where services are provided by the local authority e.g., grounds maintenance.

Despite these increases only **33%** reported that the provision of allotments would become cost neutral as a result of their charges. This is in fact a **3%** fall on 2020 figures; therefore, it does appear that despite proposed price increases to allotment holders the majority of local authorities are still subsidising the provision of allotments they are responsible for. No authority reported that they would return a surplus compared to 2020 when **2%** said they would make a profit.

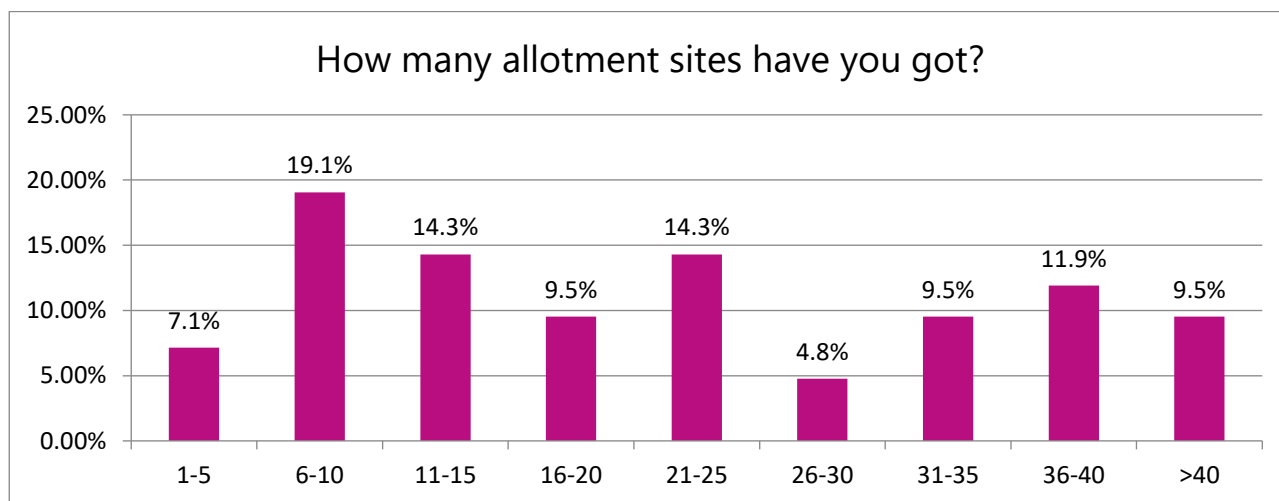
There was a split in the respondents who offered concessionary prices. **66%** reported that they did offer concessions, which is an increase of **15%** on 2020, perhaps reflecting the health and well-being benefits allotments can bring to people as shown in the points below.

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

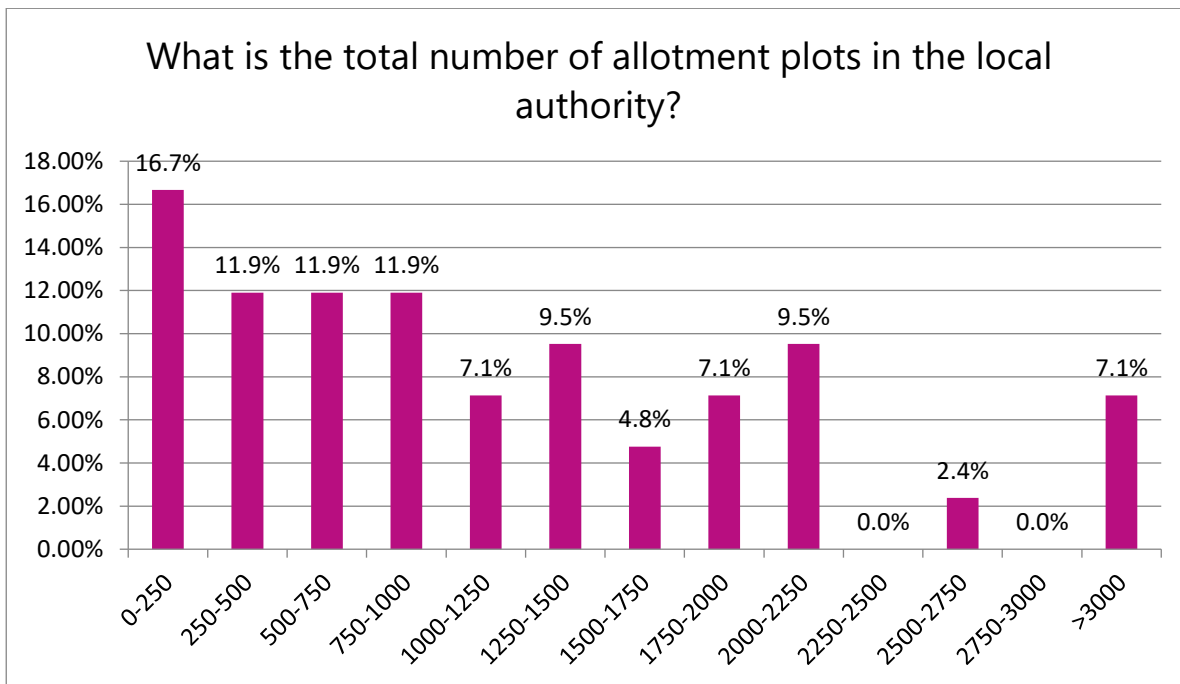
- **83%** offer discounts for pensioners, over 60's and/or retired people, a rise of 10% over 2020. The majority of these offer a 40-50% discount.
- **72%** offer discounts to the unemployed or those on income support a rise of 12% on 2020. The majority of these offer a 40-50% discount.
- **50%** offer discounts to people with disabilities. The majority offer a 40-50% discount.
- **38%** offer discounts to students. Of these, the majority offer a discount of 40-50%.

Number and size of allotments

Regarding the number of **allotment sites** per authority, the chart below shows the results of the survey's findings.



Linked to the number of sites per authority is the actual **number of plots** available. The chart above shows the number of actual plots available has changed little since 2020, although there have been some increases in the 250-500 and 1250-1500 categories. Without more detailed information and local authority returns, which have been affected by the demands of the pandemic on officer time, it is difficult to say with any certainty whether numbers have increased significantly other than overall numbers appear to have remained fairly consistent over the past two years.



In terms of the size of plots available, only **26%** stated that they have a standard size for a plot, and out of these, the most common sizes were: 250-299 square metres (**52%**), 200-249 square metres (**22%**).

The reporting of waiting lists show the demand for allotments is still high, with **51%** of respondents having 100-400 people in the waiting list for an allotment. The most significant change has been that **38%** of respondents stated that they had over 1000 people on the waiting list compared to only **20%** in 2020.

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 **34%** stated that over 18 months was the average, which is a decrease of **32%** on 2020 when the figure was **66%**. However, this decrease in waiting time could be a reflection of local authorities splitting plots to create smaller plots which many people are willing to take in order to reduce their waiting time, particularly first-time allotment holders.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that **69%** of respondents stated that new tenancies are restricted to people living within the local authority area.

Future increases in the number of allotments

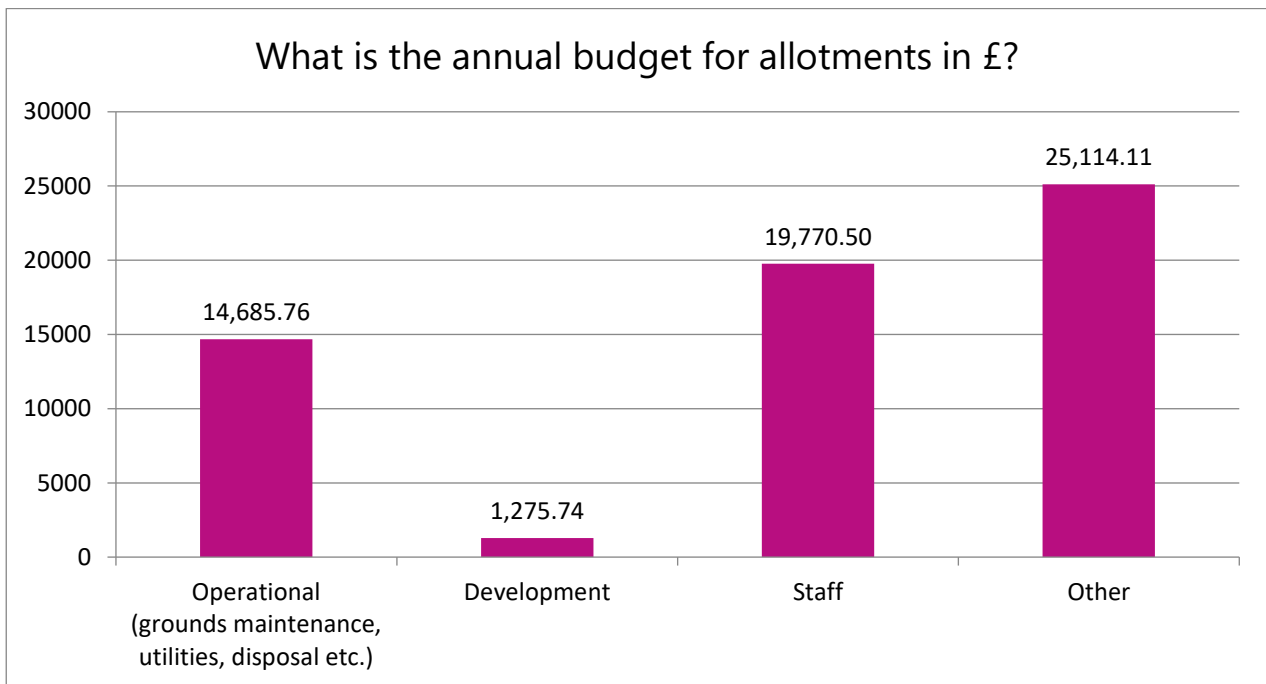
36% of respondents stated that their council plans to increase the number of allotments as opposed to **31%** in 2020. From those respondents who stated that the number of allotments is planned to increase, the method of doing this is shown in the table below:

Direct provision by the council for additional plots	80%
Provision by builders/developers as part of a housing/planning policy	60%
Provision by community groups supported/facilitated by council	33%
Provision by other council departments (e.g., Education, Social Work) as part of a healthy lifestyles/eco-schools/health type project	20%
Other	7%

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

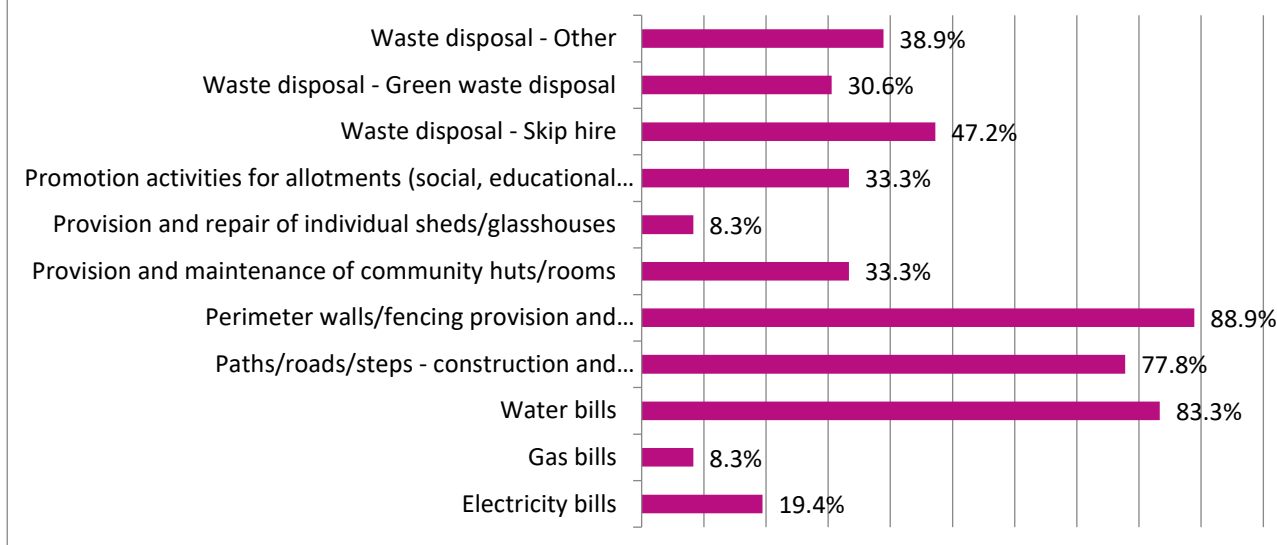
The average annual budgets for allotments were stated as follows:



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 a **1%** increase in cost / investment in 2021.

Respondents stated that their budget includes responsibility for the following:

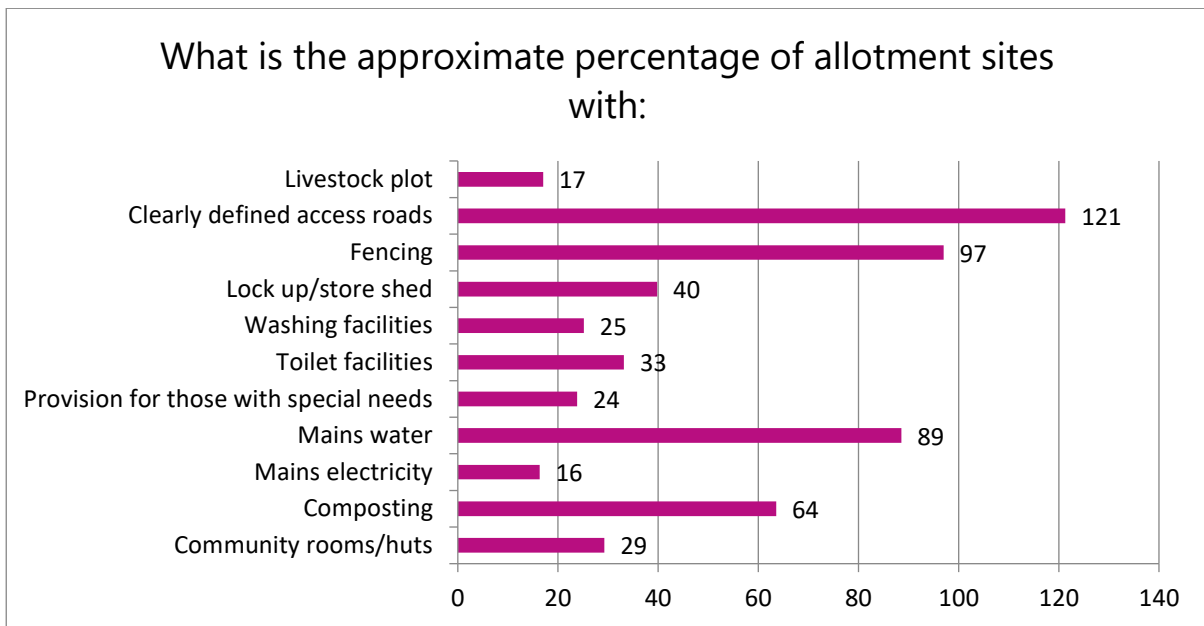
Does the budget include responsibility for



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 2021) 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, this has risen to 52%.

The full responses are as follows:

As an integral part of grounds maintenance operations/contracts	58%
By the plot holders/site association	67%
By volunteers	19%
By a dedicated allotments team/person	19%
As part of rehabilitation programmes (health, offenders etc.)	11%
No grounds maintenance is carried out on the sites	8%
Other	14%

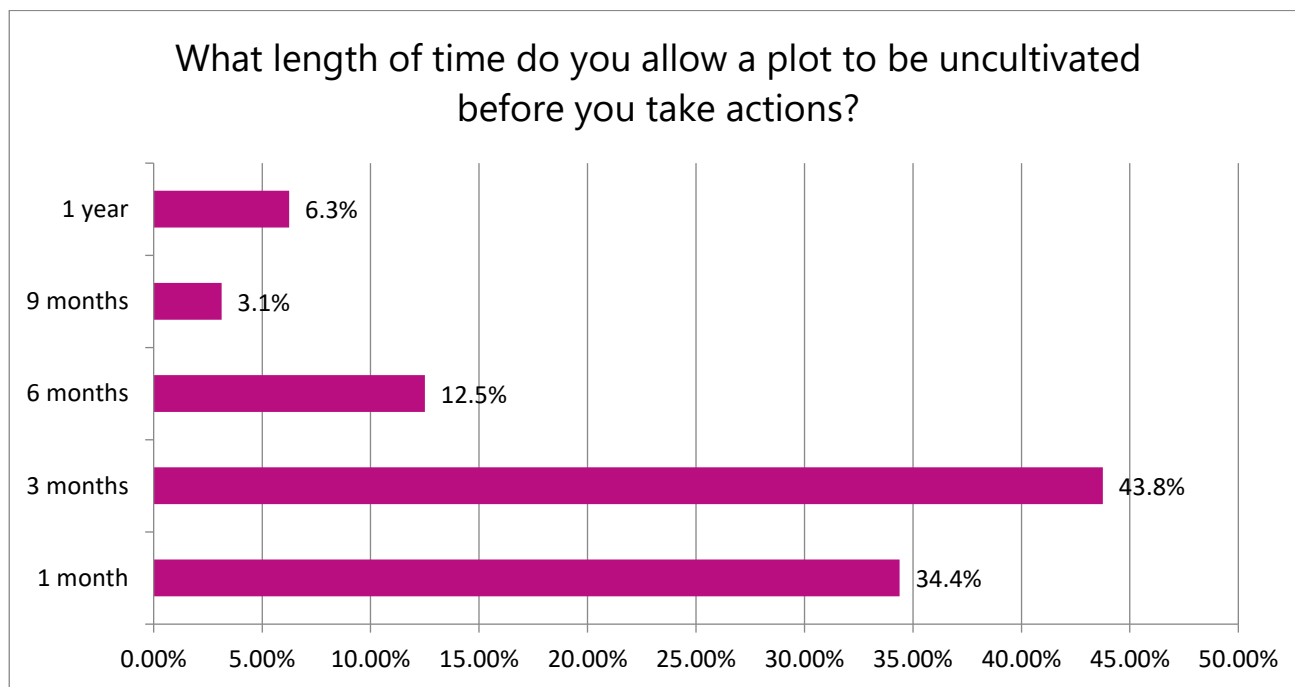
(Please note, respondents could choose more than one option on the survey for this answer).

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 appears to be a decline in those reporting that they now only allow one month before action is taken on uncultivated plots compared to previous years.

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 number 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 previous years' 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 this year 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 and of the **52%** that haven't currently got a strategy in place, **42%**, 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 the previous figure of **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%** 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:

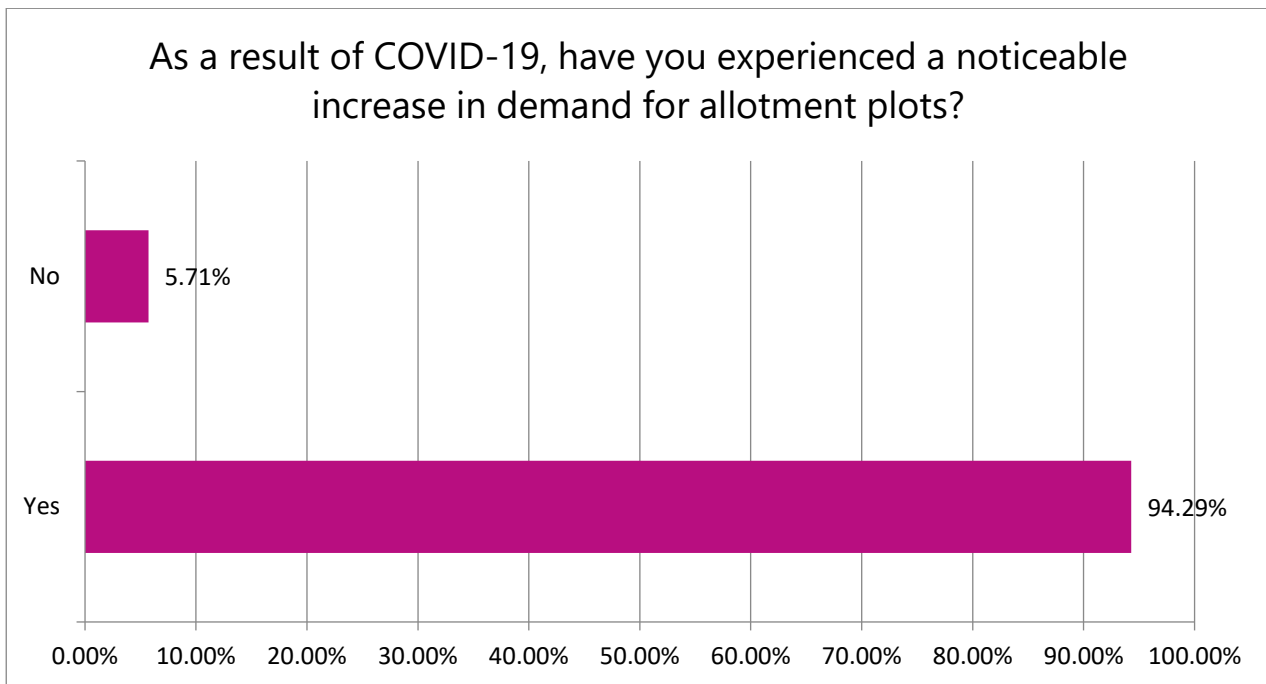
Areas being set aside for wildlife	83%
Information on how to improve biodiversity	63%
Planting pollinator friendly species	50%
Promoting native crops	21%
Other	50%

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 by respondents during 2020-2021. 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.

APSE member councils also report that 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 over **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, as well as benefiting from the health and well-being gains this experience brings. 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.

From the answers received to the survey it is quite clear that it is mainly local authorities who are continuing to provide and manage allotment sites across the UK, albeit that self -management is also growing in importance as allotment holders take a greater interest in determining how their allotment sites should be run.

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. 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 planning 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 key responsibility taken on by many allotment sites.

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, as many are now building the importance of allotments into their Health and Well-Being Strategies and also their Local Development Plans, as well as developing specific allotment strategies. 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 that the finance that is available is used to meet the known needs of their site, as well as applying in their own capacity for funding, which is not available to local authorities.

The difficulties for local authorities to be able to fund the development of new sites has been recognised and help, through partnership working with agencies, such as the NHS, who are providing funding, is welcome. 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 and again funding from agencies in this field has also been forthcoming. Even housing developments are now building the provision of allotments into their grand plans both as a means of attracting potential buyers but also as part of planning agreements.

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
APSE 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 you can register your interest [using this link](#). Please also feel free to email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

Our national advisory groups include: -

- Facilities Management & Building Cleaning
- Catering
- Cemeteries and Crematoria Services
- Climate Change and Renewable Energy Network
- Environmental Health
- Housing and Building Maintenance
- Local authorities' income generation, trading and commercialisation network
- Parks and Horticulture
- 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 2021, please contact Wayne Priestley Principal Advisor for Environmental Services at wpriestley@apse.org.uk