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State of the Market Survey 2015

Local Authority Allotment Services

Briefing 15-38
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Local Authority Allotment Services

State of the Market 2015

APSE conducted an online allotment survey during July 2015. This follows on from a previous survey which was conducted in December 2013 (click here to access the briefing paper from the previous survey), a survey in 2012, an e-mail query from 2010 and another survey from 2008. The 2015 survey asks similar questions to the previous surveys which allows for comparisons to be drawn from previous years. In total, 106 responses were received from local authorities throughout the UK. This report identifies the key findings.

Results from the survey

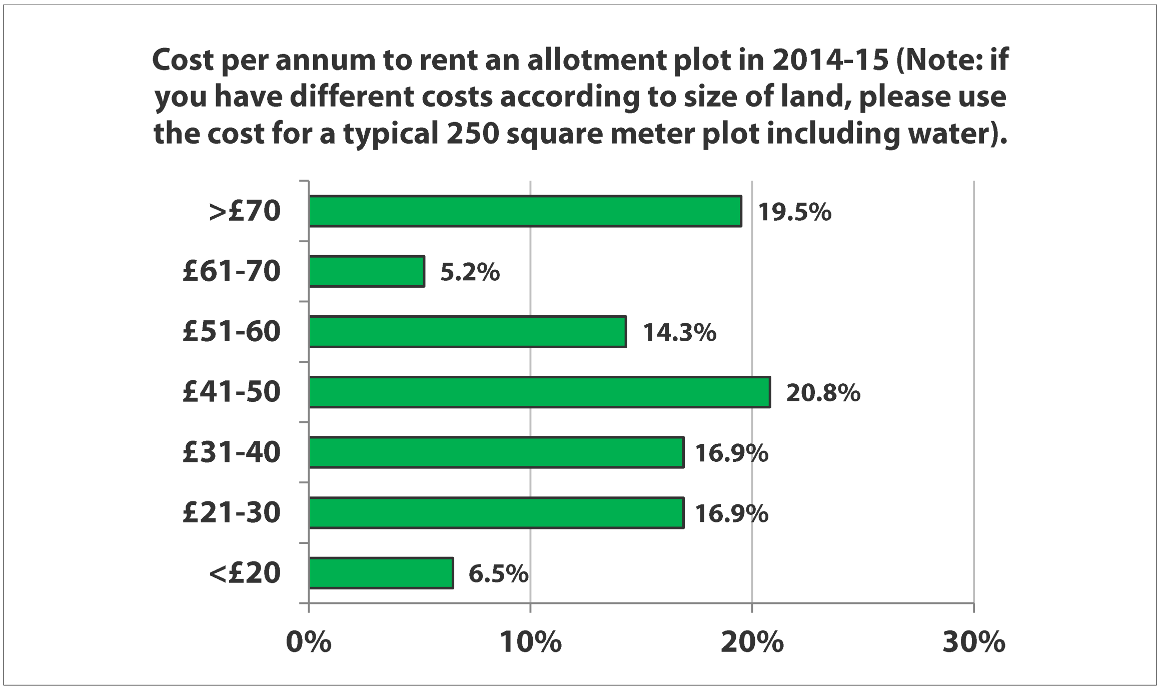
a) Number and management of allotments

97.1% of respondents answered that they have council owned allotments within their authority. From the respondents that answered 'no' to this question, 100% stated that demand has been expressed for these.

In terms of management of the allotments, 33.3% answered that they have allotments which are directly managed by a council officer, 8.3% stated that these are managed through a site committee/association and 58.3% stated that there is a mix of council and site committee/association managed sites.

b) Cost of allotments

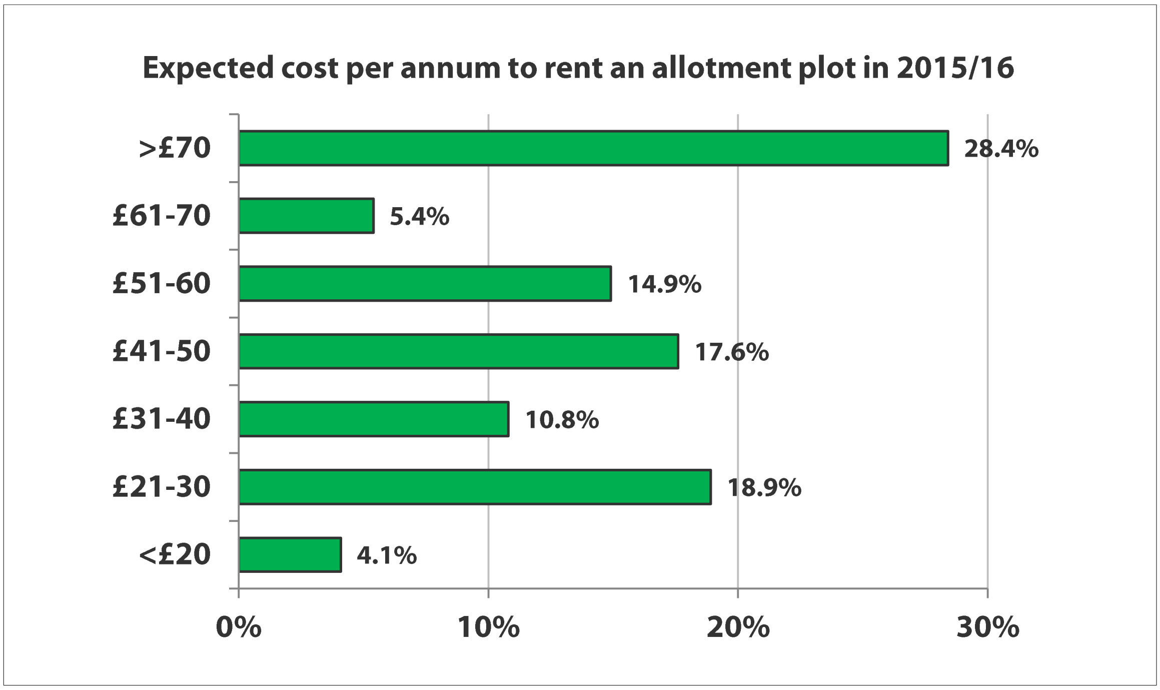
The majority of respondents stated that the cost per annum to rent an allotment in 2014-15 was between £21 and £60, although many charge over £70. The full breakdown is as follows:



68.9% of respondents are reporting a cost of between £21 and £60. In 2013-14, the cost band which received the most respondents was £41-50; this has not changed in this survey, though there has been a notable rise in those charging £51-60 and over £70.

The 2015 survey asked about previous years increases in the rent of an allotment plot and 33.8% stated that there has been an increase in this (beyond an inflationary increase) during the past 2 years.

When respondents were asked about the expected cost per annum to rent an allotment next year, 62.2% answered that they expected this to be between £21 and £60, with 28.4% expecting this to be over £70. The full breakdown is as follows:



The majority (59.0%) of respondents said that the charge is directly related to the area of the allotment (e.g. square metres) and 30.8% stated that this is standard regardless of the size. There was also a split in the respondents who answered that concessionary prices are offered (58.4% yes, 41.6% no). From those who offer concessions, the breakdown is as follows:

- 97.6% offer discounts for pensioners, over 60's and/or retired people. The majority of these (67.5%) offer a 40-50% discount.
- 52.4% offer discounts to the unemployed or those on income support. The majority of these (70.0%) offer a 40-50% discount.
- 59.5% offer discounts to people with disabilities. 69.6% of these offer a 40-50% discount.
- 25.0% offer discounts to students. Of these, 37.5% offer a discount of 20-30% and 50.0% offer a discount of 40-50%.

c) Size of allotments

In terms of the size of plots available, 40.8% stated that they have a standard size for a plot, and out of these, the most common sizes were 250-299 square metres (40.7%), 200-249 square metres (18.5%) and 100-149 square metres (18.5%). When asked for the total number of allotment sites in the local authority, the majority responded that they had 1-30 (73.4%), but this ranged to over 40 (22.5%). Again, there was a range of responses in terms of the number of allotment plots, with 69.5% having 1250 plots or less and 4.3% having over 3000 plots.

Waiting lists have proven the demand for allotments with 32.4% of respondents stating that they have 100-400 people in the waiting list for an allotment and 8.5% claiming over 1000 people on their waiting list. The majority of respondents (81.7%) 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). 68.1% of respondents stated that new tenancies are restricted to people living within the local authority area.

d) Future increases in the number of allotments

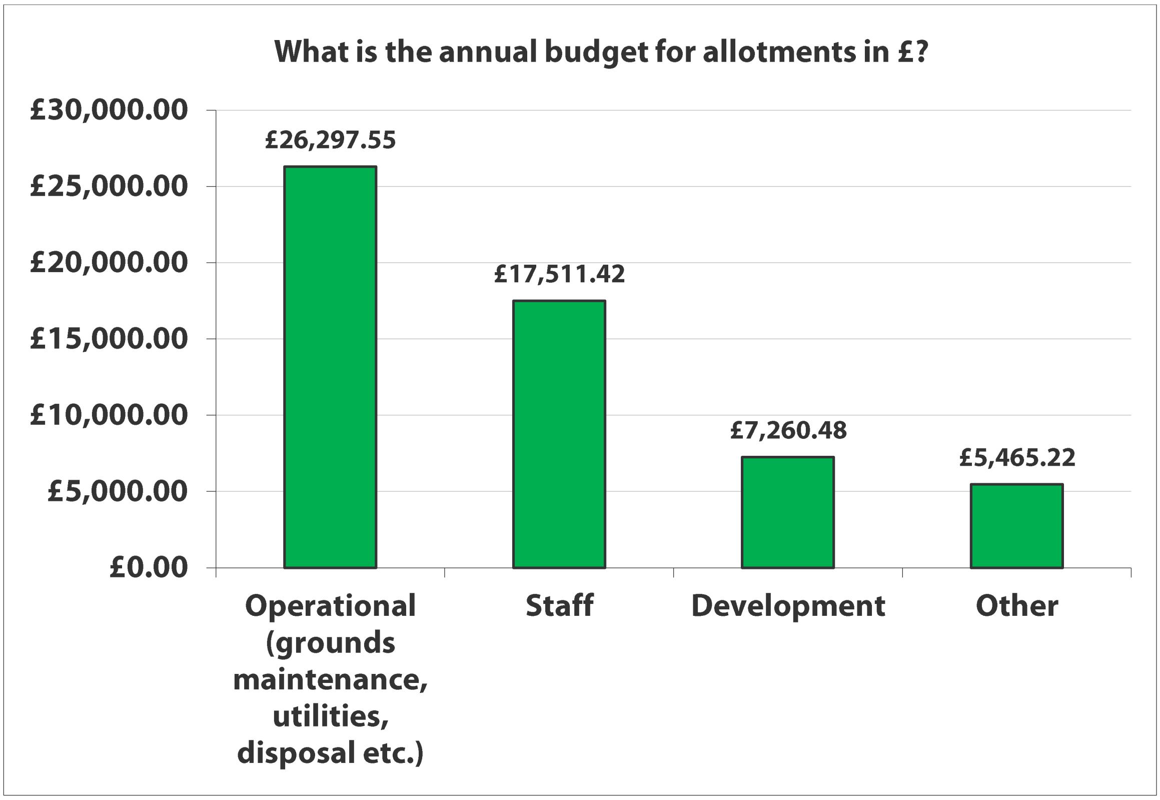
40.6% of respondents stated that their council plans to increase the number of allotments, which is a decline from 48.5% in the 2013 survey and 64.0% in the 2012 survey. This is a worrying trend as it shows that since 2012 there has been a decrease of some 23.4% of authorities planning to increase their allotment provision whilst at the same time demand for allotments is ever present. As stated above some 8.5% of council respondents are recording over a 1,000 people remain on their allotment waiting lists. This could be a reflection of the reduction in green space budgets which has occurred over the past five years. 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	**82.1%**
Provision by builders/developers as part of a housing/planning policy	**57.1%**
Provision by community groups supported/facilitated by council	**32.1%**
Provision by other council departments (e.g. Education, Social Work) as part of a healthy lifestyles/eco-schools/health type project	**7.1%**
Other	**10.7%**

This shows an increase from 2013 from 65.2% in the direct provision by the council for additional plots as well as an increase from 47.8% in the provision by builders/developers as part of a housing policy. However, the provision by other council departments, as part of a healthy lifestyles/eco-schools/health type project, has fallen from 17.4% to 10.7%.

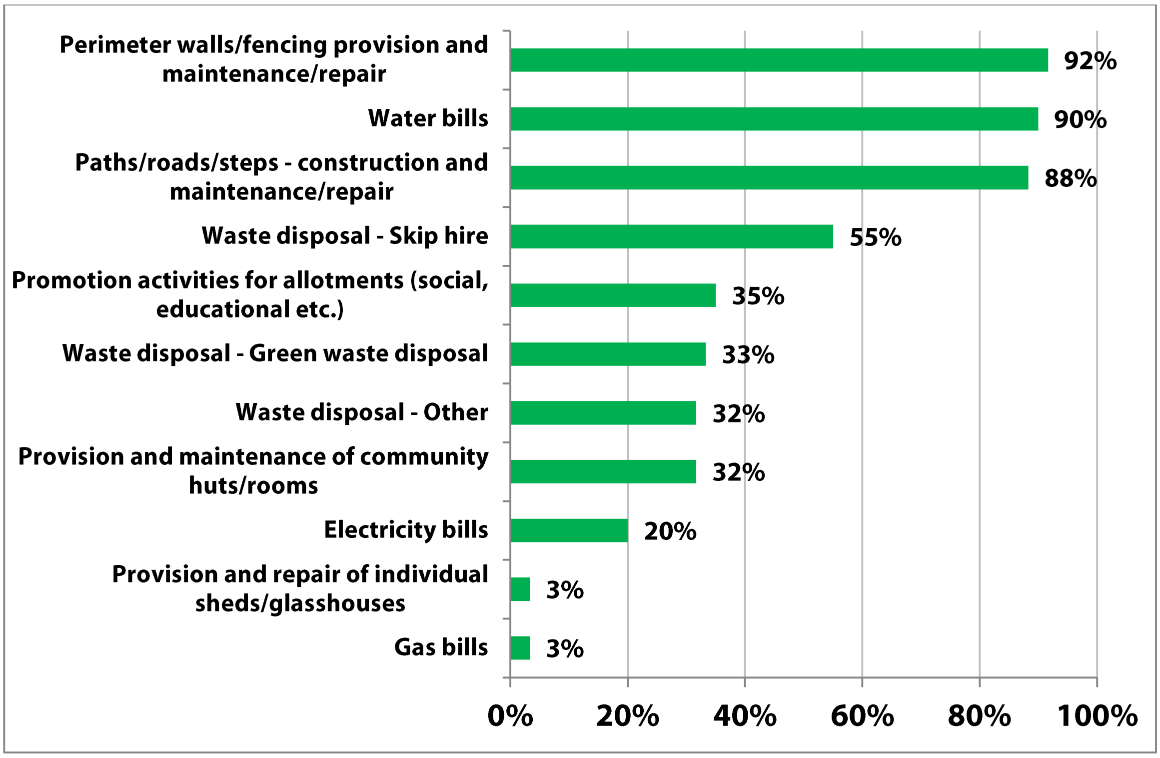
e) Budget for allotments

The average annual budgets for allotments were stated as follows:



Since the 2013 survey, the average annual operational budget for allotments has risen by £909.89, the average staff budget has fallen by £3884.08 and the average development budget has fallen by £2813.57; the falling development budget has been a continuing trend since 2008, and the falling staff budget is to be expected given local authority budget reductions and the move to create more self-management of allotment sites.

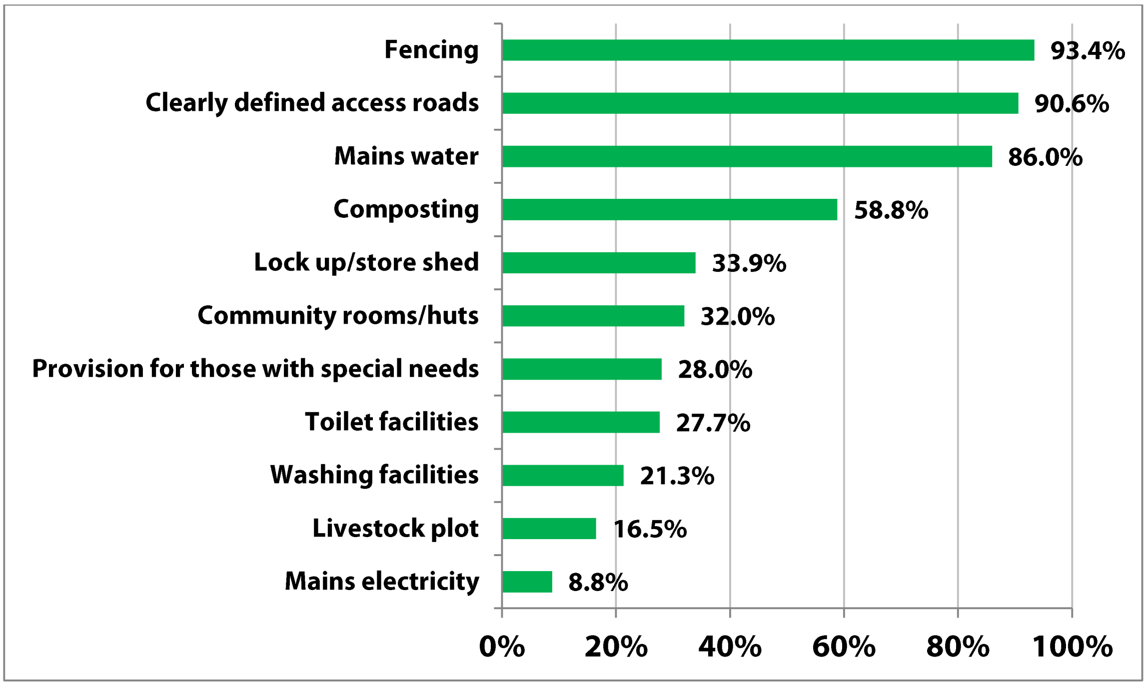
Respondents stated that their budget includes responsibility for the following:



81.4% currently subsidise managing allotments (they do not recover full costs from managing these). Of the other respondents, 16.9% break even and only 1.7% make a surplus.

f) Facilities at allotment sites

Most allotment sites have the provision of water, fencing, clearly defined access roads and composting. Some allotments 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 % of allotment sites with other facilities is as follows:



There has been an improvement in the provision of fencing at allotment sites (up 5.2% since 2013) and clearly defined access roads (up by 8.0%), and a decrease in the average provision of livestock plots (down by 4.6%).

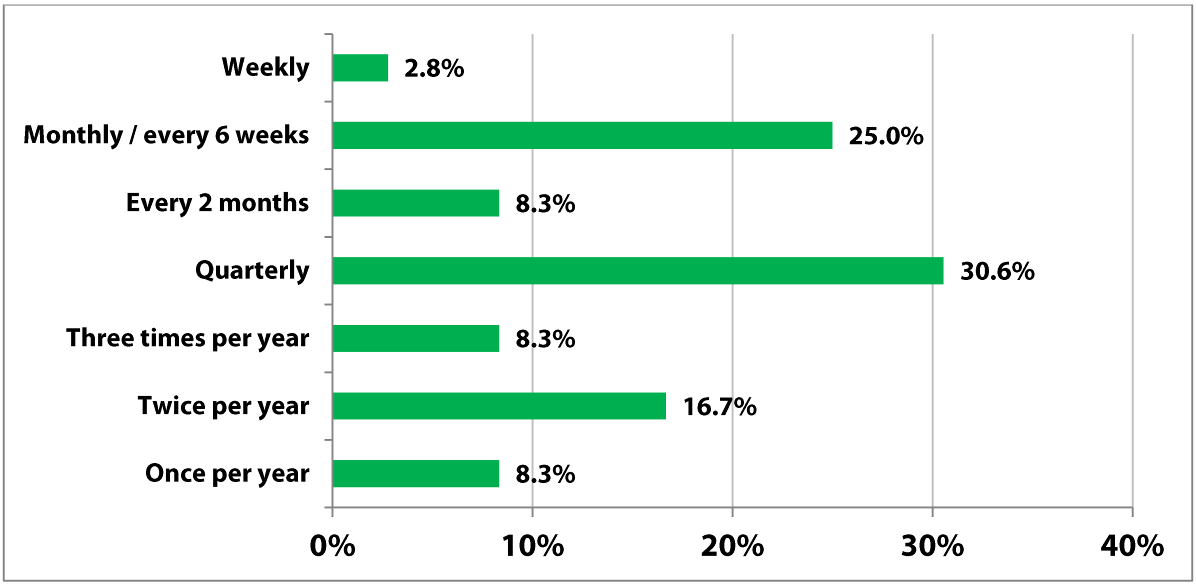
The majority of respondents stated that grounds maintenance is carried out either at allotment sites as an integral part of grounds maintenance operations/contracts (66.1%) or by plotholders/site association (50.8%). The full responses are below:

As an integral part of grounds maintenance	**66.1%**
By the plotholders/site association	**50.8%**
By volunteers	**18.6%**
As part of rehabilitation programmes (health, offenders etc)	**10.2%**
By a dedicated allotments team/person	**8.5%**
No grounds maintenance is carried out on the sites	**3.4%**

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

When asked how grounds maintenance is monitored, the majority stated that this is through inspections/site visits by a council officer (49.1%), an allotment officer (45.5%) or a site representative (27.3%).

This year, the survey asked how cultivation standards are monitored and the most frequent responses to this question as displayed in the chart below:



g) Monitoring allotments

The majority of respondents allow plots to be uncultivated for 1 month (43.8%) or 3 months (47.9%) before they take action.

53.8% of 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)
- Good behaviour (one Council is looking to reward good tenants with a 2nd plot)

26.8% of respondents restrict plot ownership to a person or a household. 26.3% of respondents allow plots to be passed on to families and friends. 87.5% of respondents have considered reducing future plot sizes to create more plots. 21.8% of respondents stated that plotholders are required to undertake a probationary period to ensure they can manage their plot effectively.

47.3% of respondents stated their authority has a policy in place for handling disputes between its tenants and 54.5% of respondents stated they have a policy in place for handling appeals against notices to quit. 38.1% of respondents stated that their authority requires their self-managed sites to have policies in place to address the issues above.

h) Security

Plotholders themselves generally manage the security on allotment sites (62.1%) with 37.9% of respondents stating that they don't actively manage security. 12.1% stated they have a 'plot watch' scheme or something similar, 6.9% stated community wardens manage security, and 3.4% stated park rangers manage security. The majority of respondents have an allotment forum, friends group or something similar (68.4%).

i) Allotment strategy

56.1% of respondents stated that they have an allotments strategy and of the 43.9% that haven't currently got a strategy in place, 36.0% stated that the council is planning to develop one within the next 2 years.

41.1% stated that they are intending to increase the price of allotment plots within the next 2 years and a further 7.1% within the next 5 years; 28.6% are reviewing this. There has been a continued decline in the percentage of respondents who are intending to increase the price of allotment plots from 47% in 2013 and 56% in 2012 and from those reviewing this from 29% in 2013 and 34% in 2012. This may be a reflection of local authorities already having gone through the review process on the price of allotment plots.

Of those who are intending to increase the price of allotment plots, 59.3% stated that even though they are increasing the price, the council would still have to subsidise the service; 37.0% stated that this would make the service cost neutral and only 3.7% stated that this would result in them making a surplus.

j) Biodiversity

72.7% of respondents stated that they promote biodiversity amongst plot-holders by providing information on how to improve biodiversity; 68.2% have areas being set aside for wildlife, 31.8% plant pollinator friendly species and 4.5% promote native crops.

86.4% of respondents stated that environmental sustainability is promoted with regards to site management by adopting water-saving measures such as water butts; 50.0% stated that they cultivate plots organically and 13.6% use solar power instead of mains power.

APSE Comment

It is clear allotments are still seen as vital community facilities with the demand for new sites, and waiting lists for existing sites still being an issue for many local authorities. As more people become urbanised the need for access to green space becomes more important and allotments for many provide an escape from the busy lives they lead. Scotland has recently provided allotments with statutory protection with local authorities having to consult with ministers prior to closing a site, but also needing to provide a replacement site locally if there is still a demonstrable demand.

Statutory protection of allotments may give people the confidence to invest the time and energy required to maximise the productivity of their plots and ensure that valuable green space is used for the benefit of local communities. Conversely, as council resources are increasingly under pressure, it is important to balance the needs and benefits of allotments, and allotment users, with those of the whole community which a council serves.

It is also welcomed that provision of new allotments as part of council strategies has seen an increase in provision being built into agreements with builders and developers as part of their housing policy. This near to 10% increase in provision from this source, rising from 47.8% in 2013 to 57.1% in 2015, demonstrates that councils are increasingly discerning about what contributions they can secure, for local communities, on new developments. As housing land remains at a premium in many parts of the UK (as found in APSE research '*Housing the Nation: Ensuring Councils can Build More and Better Homes*') and sizeable gardens remain out of reach for many tenants and home owners, this is a positive contribution to local areas which councils are increasingly demanding from developers.

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.

Our national advisory groups include:-

- Building cleaning
- Catering
- Housing, construction and building maintenance
- Parks, horticultural and ground maintenance
- Renewables and climate change
- Roads, highways and street lighting
- Service delivery models
- Service transformation and performance management
- Sports and leisure management
- Vehicle maintenance and transport
- Waste management, refuse collection and street cleansing

If you require any further information on the findings of this State of the Market survey 2015 please contact Wayne Priestley Principal Advisor for Environmental Services at wpriestley@apse.org.uk