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State of the Market Survey 2019

Local Authority Allotment Services

Briefing 19-33
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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 2019

APSE conducted an online allotment survey between May and June 2019. This follows on from a series of previous surveys which were conducted in 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2013, 2012, 2010 and 2008. The 2019 survey asks similar questions to the previous surveys in order to allow for comparisons to be drawn from previous years. In total, 112 responses were received from local authorities throughout the UK. This report identifies the key findings.

Results from the survey

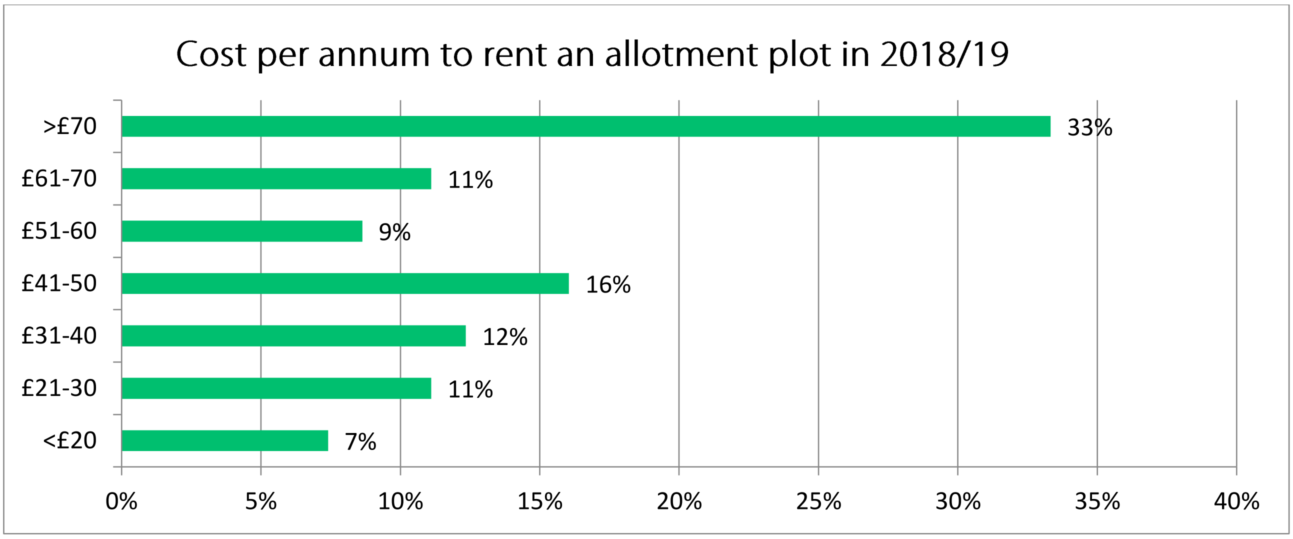
a) Number and management of allotments

94% of respondents answered that they have council owned allotments within their authority which is a fall of 2% from the 2018 survey which may suggest further allotment sites have been closed or ownership transferred to community groups.

In terms of management of the allotments, 21% answered that they have allotments which are directly managed by a council officer, which is a fall of 7% on last year's results, 19% stated that allotment sites are managed through a site committee/association (a 9% increase on 2018). 60% of respondents stated that they have a mix of council and site committee/association managed sites, which is a 5% fall on last year's survey results, suggesting that there is a growing number of sites being managed by community associations. This approach appears to be a growing trend as figures show that this figure has risen by 11% over the last two years.

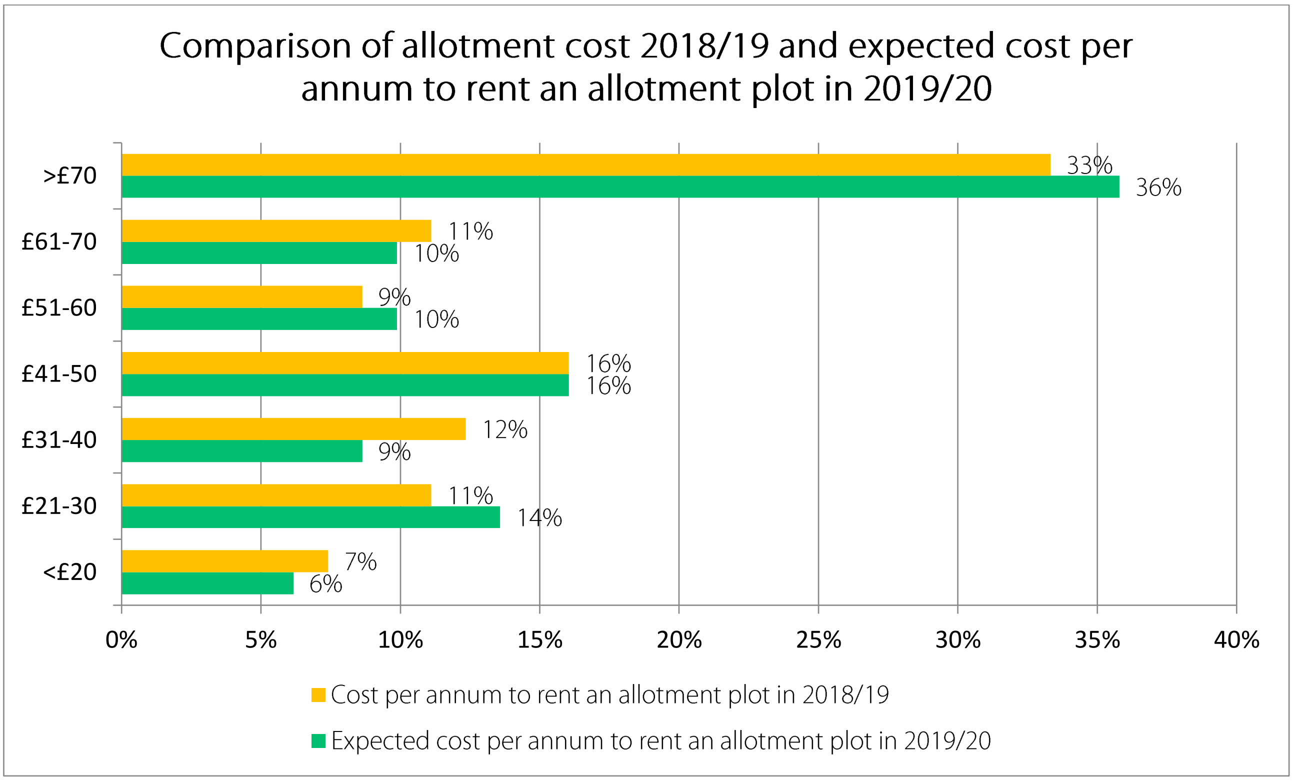
b) Cost of allotments

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 2018-19, with over 50% charging more than £50. The fact there is a wide variety of charges below this cost suggest size and facilities may have a part to play, but it is noticeable most local authorities are now implementing charges which may now 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 2019/20 as compared to 2018/19. It appears that there is likely to be little change in allotment cost, However, 3% 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 (77%), replied that the cost for an allotment is directly related to the area of the allotment (e.g. square metres) whilst 17% stated that the charge is standard regardless of the size. This is a 3% decrease on 2018, but this does shows that the size of an allotment is still the determining factor for charging criteria. With regards to levels of increased costs, 21% of respondents stated they had increased allotment costs above the standard level of inflation which is a rise of 4% on 2018, when 17% stated their increases were above the level of inflation.

In 2019 34% of respondents now state that they will be continuing to increase allotment costs over the next five years and a further 30% replied that they were currently reviewing allotment costs. However in 2017, 46% of respondents said they were intending to increase costs over the next 5 years. This ongoing fall could again be a reflection of allotment holder pressure to prevent further price increases.

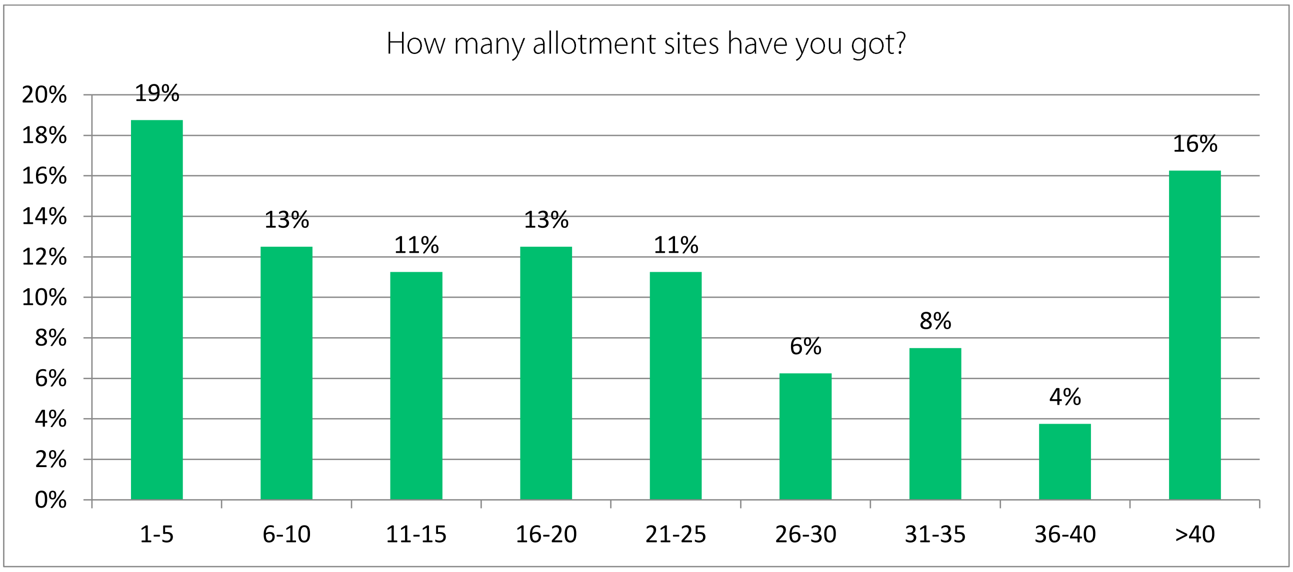
Despite these increases only 29% reported that the provision of allotments would become cost neutral as a result of their charges which is a fall of 3% on 2018 figures. So it appears, despite price increase to allotment holders, costs of service provision are increasing faster. 67% said that they would still need to subsidise the cost of allotment provision. Only 5% said they would make a profit.

There was a split in the respondents who offered concessionary prices (61%) and those that did not (39%). From those who offer concessions, the breakdown is as follows:

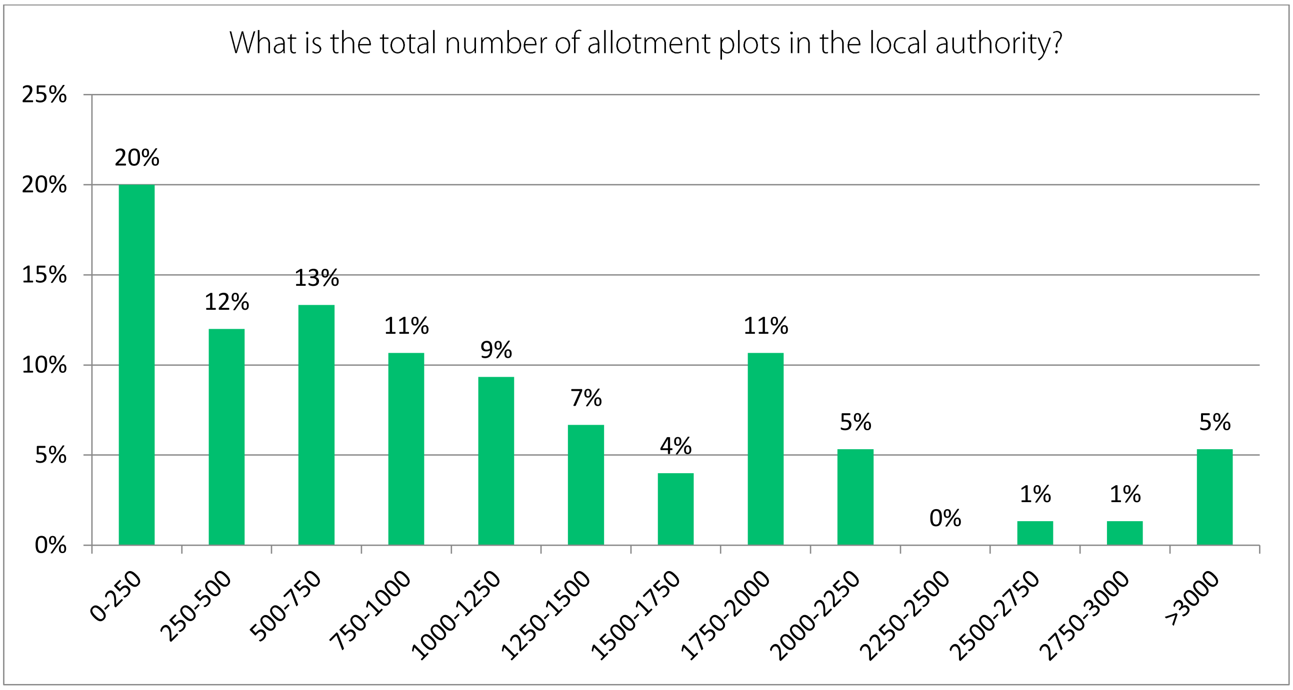
- 88% offer discounts for pensioners, over 60's and/or retired people. The majority of these (65%) offer a 40-50% discount.
- 59% offer discounts to the unemployed or those on income support. The majority of these (60%) offer a 40-50% discount.
- 49% offer discounts to people with disabilities. The majority of these (50%) offer a 40-50% discount.
- 29% offer discounts to students. Of these, the majority (65%) offer a discount of 40-50%.

c) 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 below shows the number of actual plots available.



In terms of the size of plots available, 40% stated that they have a standard size for a plot, and out of these, the most common size was 250-299 square metres (33%) whereas in 2018 the most common size was 200-249 square metres (33%) This clearly shows there has been an increase in allotment sizes. Many respondents commented that they have other plot sizes are available.

The reporting of waiting lists show the demand for allotments is still high, with 69% of respondents having 100-400 people in the waiting list for an allotment compared to 75% in 2018 which shows a slight improvement. 8% of respondents claim they have over 1000 people on their waiting list which was the same percentage in 2018. The majority of respondents (83%) 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 49% stated that over 18 months was the average, which is a rise of 9% on 2018 when the figure was 40%.

12% of respondents could guarantee a plot within 6 months which is a 3% improvement on 2018 when the figure was 9%. The average waiting time is now between 6-18 months (51%). 8 % of respondents can offer an allotment plot within 3 months, again a 3% improvement on 2018..

73% of respondents stated that new tenancies are restricted to people living within the local authority area.

d) Future increases in the number of allotments

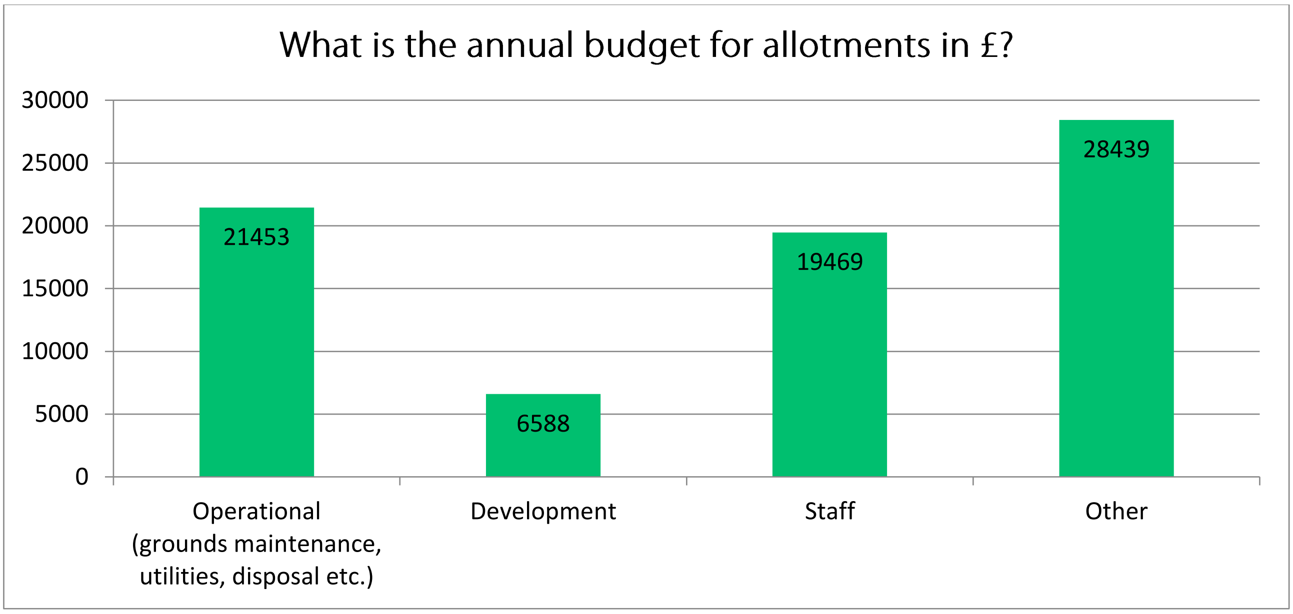
27% of respondents stated that their council plans to increase the number of allotments as oppose to 36% in 2018. From those respondents who stated that the number of allotments is planned to increase, the method of doing this is shown in the table below:

Direct provision by the council for additional plots	52%
Provision by builders/developers as part of a housing/planning policy	76%
Provision by community groups supported/facilitated by council	43%
Provision by other council departments (e.g. Education, Social Work) as part of a healthy lifestyles/eco-schools/health type project	24%
Other	5%

What is noticeable is that the provision by community groups and other council department as part of health and well-being projects has been the main areas where additional allotment are being provided, most likely through external funding grants.

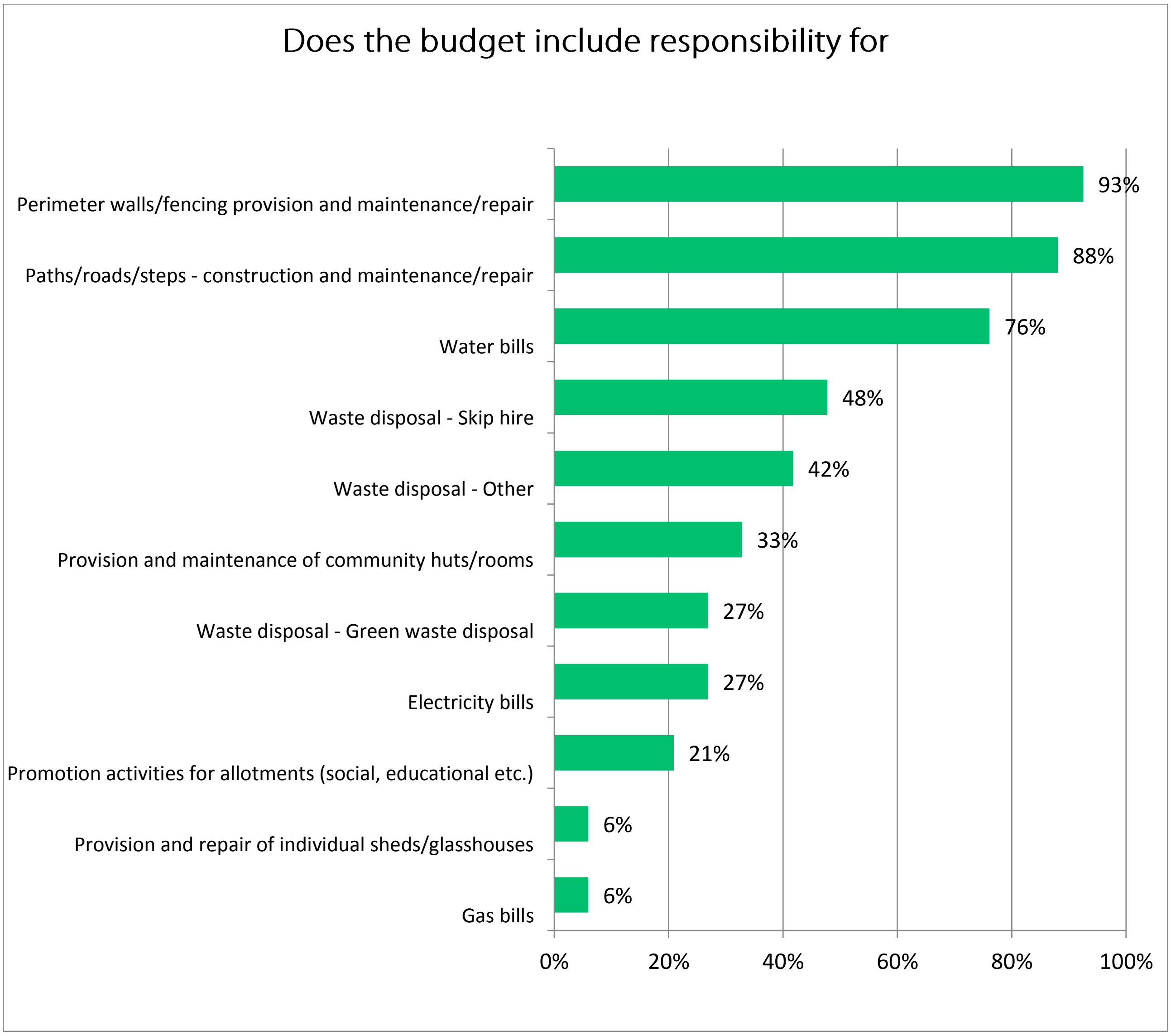
e) Budget for allotments

The average annual budgets for allotments were stated as follows:



These figures show a fall in all costs against 2018 apart from the 'other costs' category where there has been a significant rise. From discussion with survey respondents it appears theses costs can include a wide range of costs/income ranging from lease costs for land on which allotments plots are sited, repair bills, external income from grants and S106 and income from developers. Therefore it is proposed for the 2020 survey to gain more detail as to what respondents are including in this answer.

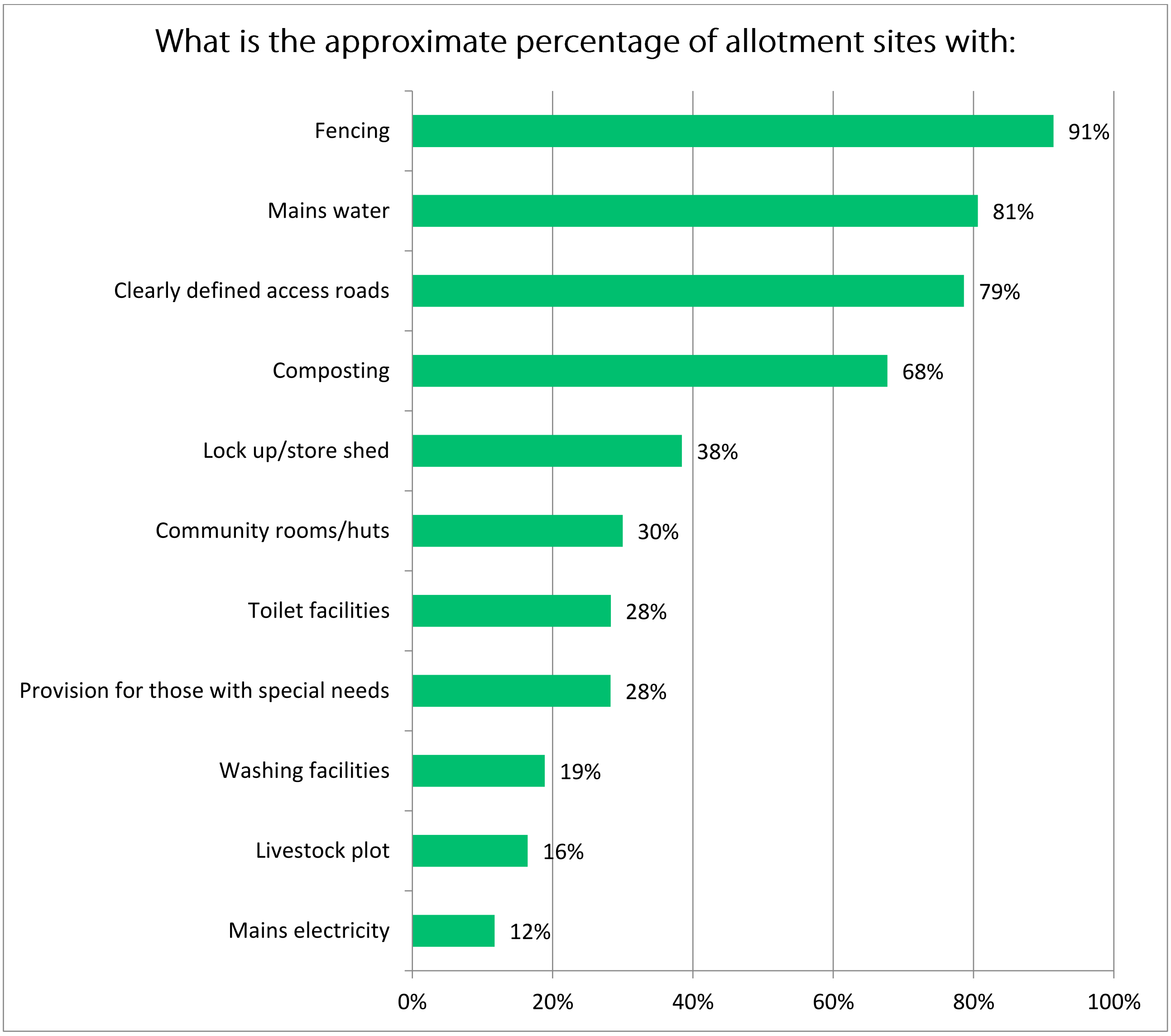
Respondents stated that their budget includes responsibility for the following:



It is again noticeable from the figures that there has been increases in responsibility levels 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 and waste removal bills as these are areas where they can take personal control through improved water efficiency and recycling/composting.

f) 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:



The most noticeable increase has been in relation to the amount of sites now carrying out composting which has risen from 61% in 2018 to 68% in 2019. This possibly links back to the comment made earlier about 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. The majority of respondents

Regarding site maintenance, there seems to be a split between local authorities carrying out maintenance and allotment associations themselves. What is interesting to see is that 19% of respondents stated that maintenance was sometimes carried out a part of rehabilitation either offenders or as part of a health programme.

The full responses are as follows:

As an integral part of grounds maintenance operations/contracts	**56%**
By the plot holders/site association	**12%**
By volunteers	**28%**
By a dedicated allotments team/person	**61%**
As part of rehabilitation programmes (health, offenders etc.)	**19%**
No grounds maintenance is carried out on the sites	**3%**
Other	**16%**

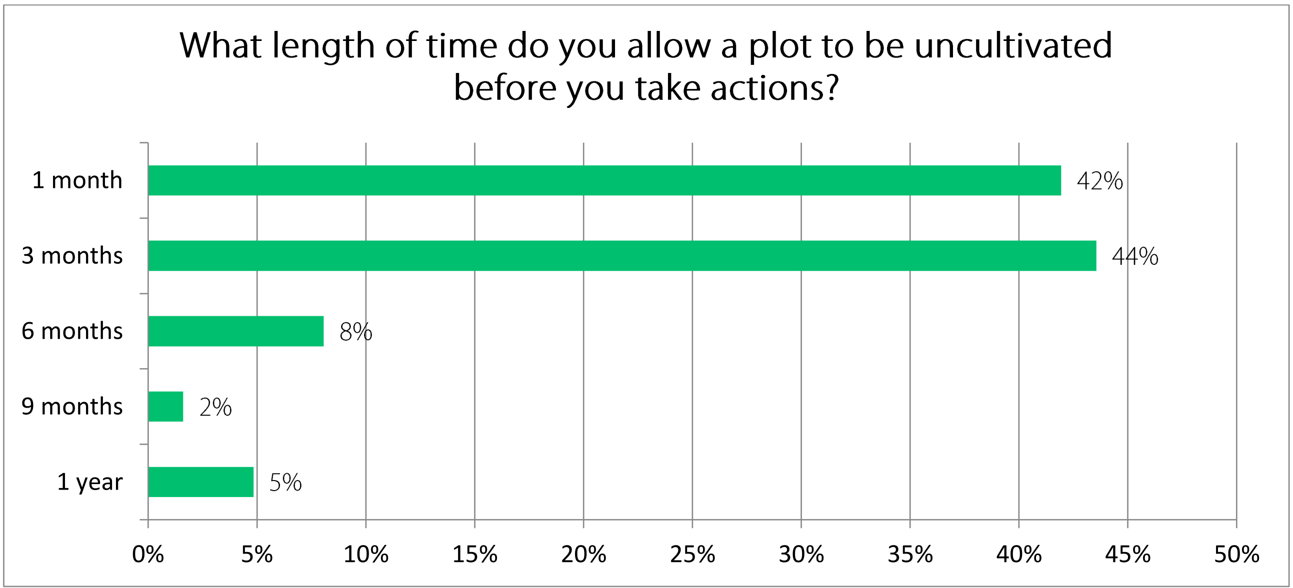
(Please note, respondents could choose more than one option on the survey for this answer).

g) Monitoring allotments

When asked how grounds maintenance is monitored, the majority stated that this is through inspections/site visits by an allotment officer (51%). Other responses included a council officer (47%) or a site representative (43%). This method of monitoring sites has varied little over the past few years.

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 2018 is that there has been a rise in those reporting that they now only allow one month before action is taken on uncultivated plots, 39% in 2018 as opposed to 42% in 2019.

The majority of respondents allow plots to be uncultivated for 3 months (44%) before they take action. However, 42% now monitor levels of cultivation monthly.

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)

43% of respondents restrict plot ownership to a person or a household, which is an increase of 3% on 2018 responses. 31% of respondents allow plots to be passed on to families and friends, a fall of 3% on 2018 returns, possibly a reflection of trying to reduce waiting lists. 86% 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.

h) Security

Plot-holders themselves generally manage the security on allotment sites (66%) with 39% of respondents stating that they don't actively manage security. 9% stated that they have a 'plot watch' scheme or something similar, 5% stated that park rangers manage security and 3% stated that community wardens manage 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.

i) Allotment strategy

42% of respondents stated that they have an allotments strategy and of the 58% that haven't currently got a strategy in place, 30% stated that the council is planning to develop one within the next 2 years. 54% stated that their health and wellbeing strategy recognises the value of allotments.

53% of Local authorities have a Friends Group/ Forum or similar.

67% of respondents now include allotments into their Local Plans and 54% have the value of allotments recognised within their Health and Well-Being strategies.

j) Biodiversity

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

Areas being set aside for wildlife	**77%**
Information on how to improve biodiversity	**53%**
Planting pollinator friendly species	**53%**
Promoting native crops	**17%**
Other	**32%**

Other than the setting aside of areas for wildlife all the areas above have seen slight falls between 2018 and 2019. Other responses in relation to promoting biodiversity, included "encouraging bees by allowing beehives on plots" and "network 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 (91%). 49% stated that they cultivate plots organically and almost 26% of allotment sites have begun to use solar power instead of mains power, which is a 5% increase on 2018 returns. 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.

APSE Comment

From the answers received to the survey it is quite clear that local authorities 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 re 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 meet 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 responses 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 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.

This 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, 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.

Our national advisory groups include:-

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Environmental Health

Housing and Building Maintenance

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 2018 please contact Wayne Priestley Principal Advisor for Environmental Services at wpriestley@apse.org.uk