apse membership resources

State of the Market Survey 2022

Local Authority Allotment Services

Briefing 22-33
August 2022

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Local Authority Allotment Services

State of the Market 2022

APSE conducted an online allotment survey in early Summer 2022 which follows on from a series of previous surveys which were conducted in 2021, 2020, 2019, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2013, 2012, 2010 and 2008. The 2022 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 following the surge in demands 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 was 64 and represents a 22% increase on 2021 and shows that the survey has statistical validity with regards to its findings.

Number and management of allotments

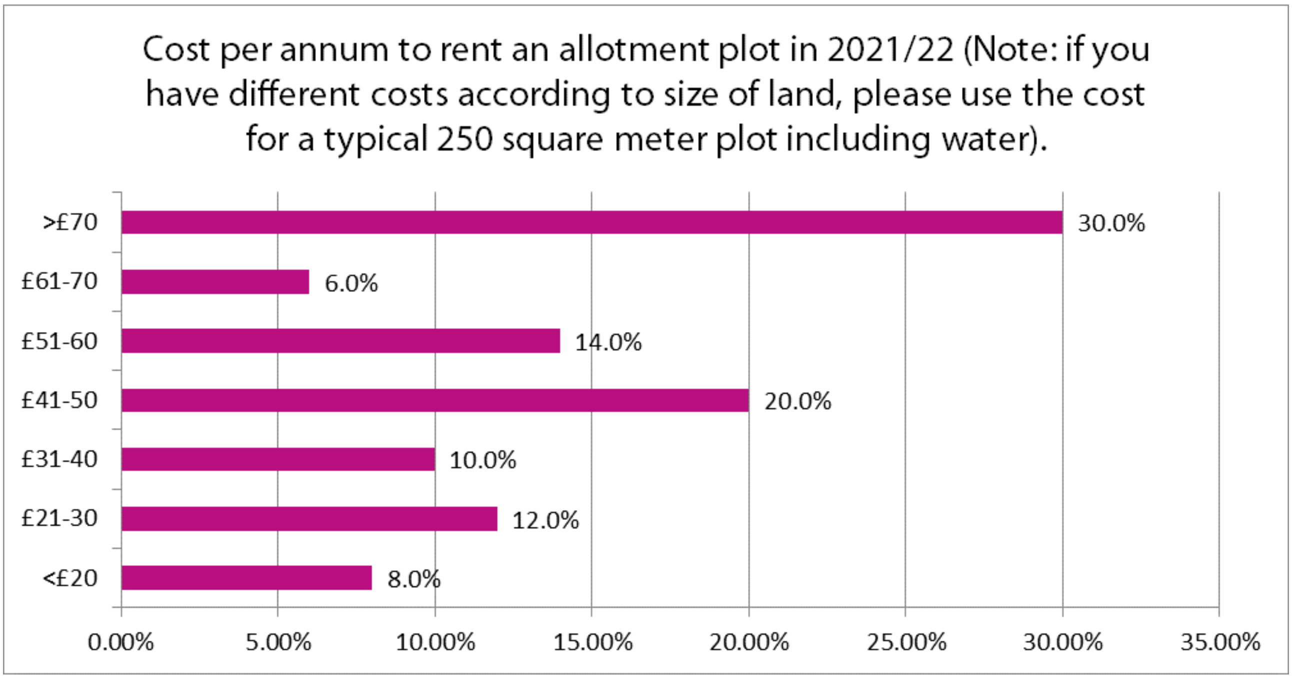
When asked about the management of allotments **93.5%** of respondents answered that they have council owned allotments within their authority showing local authorities still see the provision of allotments as a role they wish to support.

In terms of management of the allotments, **41%** answered that they have allotments which are directly managed by a council officer, which is an increase of 11% on last year's results, **13%** stated that allotment sites are managed through a site committee / association (a **6%** increase on 2021). **46%** of respondents stated that they have a mix of council and site committee / association managed sites, which is a 17% fall on last year's survey results, suggesting that there has been a growth in the number of allotment sites reverting back to sole council management of allotment sites.

Results also showed that **27%** of local authority respondents, who **do not** currently manage sites, had received requests for new allotment provision. In 2021, 32% of respondents stated they did not provide allotment sites. 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. The reduction in the number of councils not providing sites implies that there has been an increase in sites being provided by councils in areas they were previously none. In Scotland, Part 9 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 places a statutory obligation on local authorities to provide wherever practicable 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 2021-22, with **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 2022/23 as compared to 2021/22. It appears that there is likely to be little change in allotment cost other than inflationary increases, although a few councils are increasing costs to try to make allotments cost neutral.

The majority of respondents **(72%),** replied that the cost for an allotment is directly related to the area of the allotment (e.g., square metres) whilst **19%** 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, only **11%** of respondents stated they had increased allotment costs above the standard level of inflation, which is a fall of

9% on 2021, when 20% stated their increases were above the level of inflation over the last two years.

In 2022, **26%** of respondents now state that they will be continuing to increase allotment costs over the next five years, compared to **33%** in 2021, and a further **43%** replied that they were currently reviewing allotment costs. The decrease in respondents intending to raise costs over the next 5 years.

Despite these increases only **30%** reported that the provision of allotments would become cost neutral as a result of their charges. This is in fact a **3%** fall on 2021 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, as was the case in 2021

There was a split in the respondents who offered concessionary prices. **56%** reported that they did offer concessions, which is a decrease of **10%** on 2021, which is perhaps surprising considering the health and well-being benefits allotments bring, but this may be due to the fact that as so many sites are subsidised, offering concessions may not be economically viable in terms of managing service costs.

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

- **71%** offer discounts for pensioners, over 60's and/or retired people, a rise of 12% over 2021. The majority of these offer a 40-50% discount.
- **57%** offer discounts to the unemployed or those on income support a fall of 15% on 2021. The majority of these offer a 40-50% discount.
- **37%** offer discounts to people with disabilities, a fall of 13% on 2021. The majority offer a 40-50% discount.
- **32%** offer discounts to students a fall of 6% on 2021. Of these, the majority offer a discount of 40-50%.

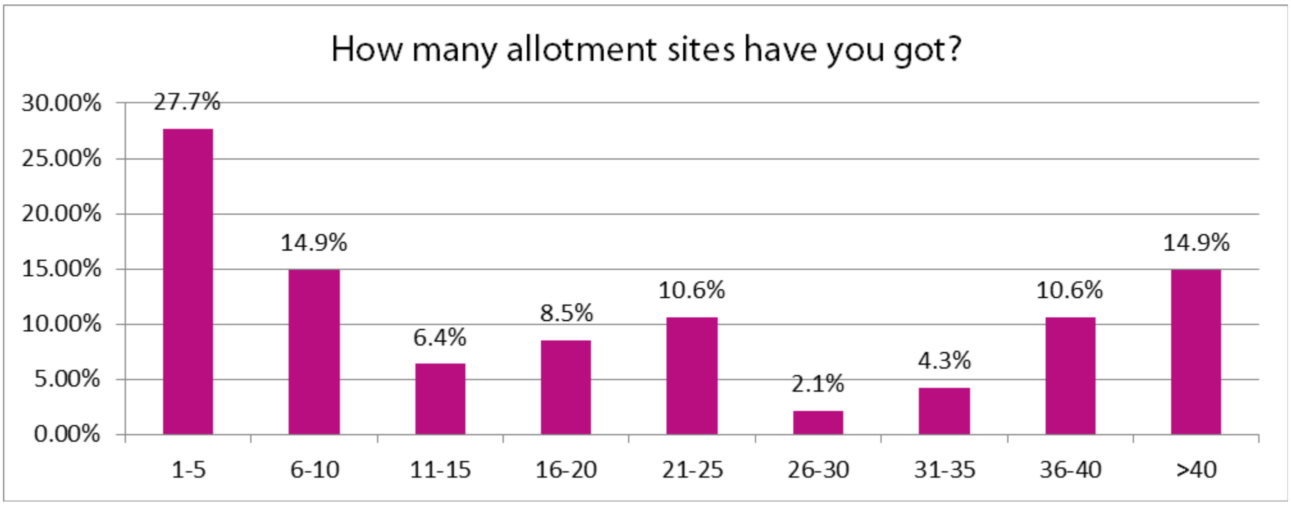
Facilities for the disabled

72% of respondents reported that they provided facilities for the disabled.

The types of facilities included: raised beds, disabled toilets, plots closer to the entrance, ramps and improved pathways and 'buddy' systems.

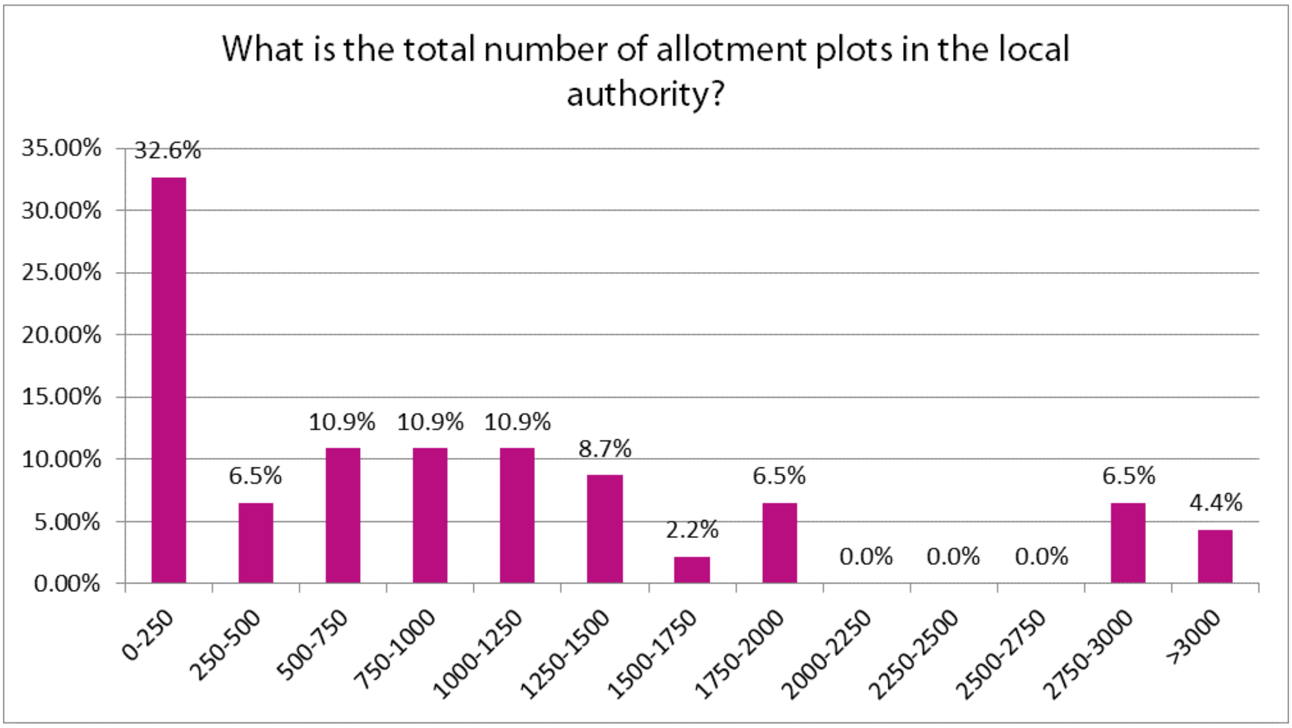
Number and size of allotments

Regarding the number of **allotment sites** per authority, the chart below shows the results of the survey's findings. The most noticeable change has been an increase in the number of smaller sites. This may suggest councils are developing more smaller sites as a means to meet demand which may mean a greater ability to spread the availability of sites across their areas.



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, and has changed little since 2021, 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, **46%** stated that they have a standard size for a plot, and out of these, the most common sizes were: 150-199 square metres (**30%**) 250-299 square metres (**21%**), Noticeably there has been an increase in smaller plots which may be a reflection of a policy to reduce plot sizes to reduce waiting lists and to make plots more manageable., indeed 64% of respondents said they had reduced plot sizes where possible, mostly by half. In some instances, quarter plots were being offered. some of the plots are seen as starter plots and larger plots may be offered in the future. Councils reported that there had been very little negative reaction to this approach as most people were simply pleased to receive a plot.

The reporting of waiting lists show the demand for allotments is still high, with **55%** of respondents having between 100-400 people in the waiting list for an allotment, 100 being the greater proportion. **33%** of respondents stated that they still had over 1000 people on the waiting list compared to only **38%** in 2021.

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 **58%** stated that over 18 months was the average, which is an increase of **26%** on 2021 when the figure was **34%**. This increase in waiting time shows that despite local authorities splitting plots to create smaller plots which many people are willing to take in order to reduce their waiting time, the demand is still out-stripping the ability to provide enough plots.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that **72%** of respondents stated that new tenancies are restricted to people living within the local authority area.

Future increases in the number of allotments

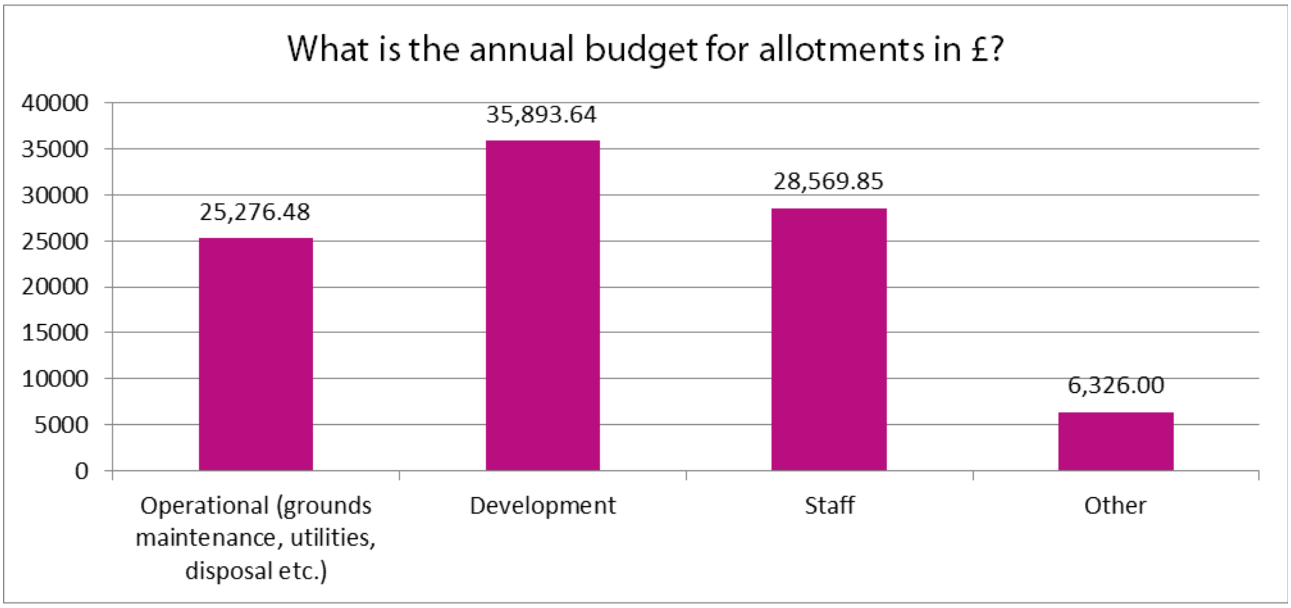
47% of respondents stated that their council plans to increase the number of allotments as opposed to **36%** in 2021. From those respondents who stated that the number of allotments is planned to increase, the method of doing this is shown in the table below:

Direct provision by the council for additional plots	**72%**
Provision by builders/developers as part of a housing/planning policy	**50%**
Provision by community groups supported/facilitated by council	**41%**
Provision by other council departments (e.g., Education, Social Work) as part of a healthy lifestyles/eco-schools/health type project	**32%**
Other	**18%**

What is noticeable is that the provision by local authorities is still the major source of new allotments sites. Provision by community groups and 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.

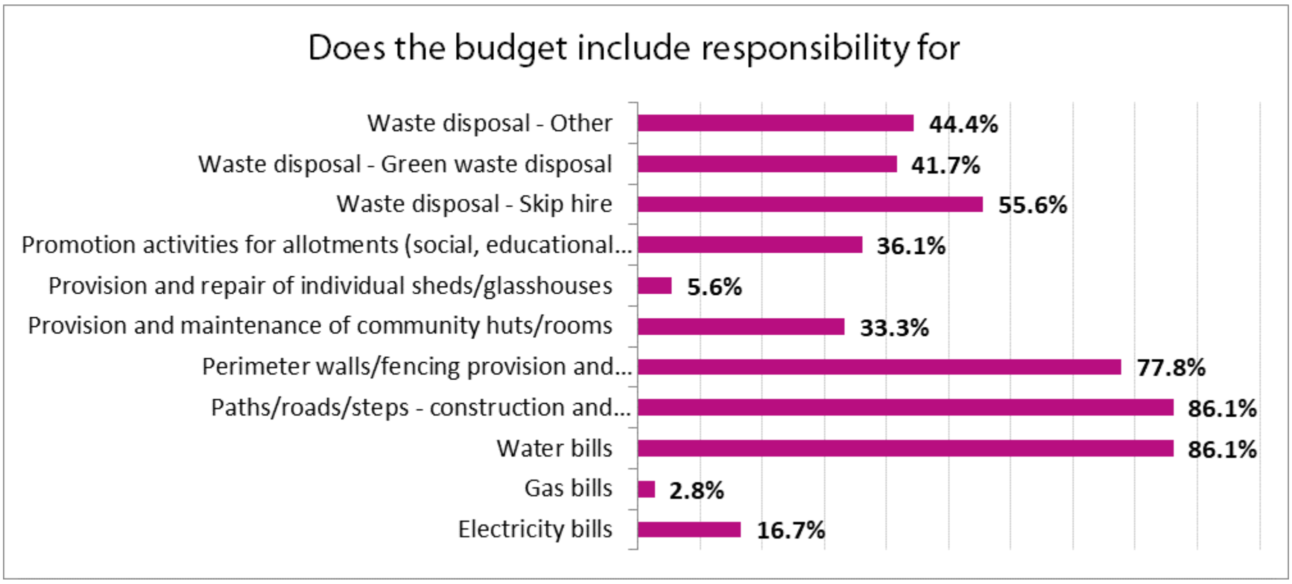
Budget for allotments

The average annual budgets for allotments were stated as follows:



These figures show an increase in all costs against 2021 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. The most noticeable increase has been with regards to development costs which suggests councils are looking to increase the provision of more allotments sites which is also reflected in increased spend on both staff and operational costs over 2021.

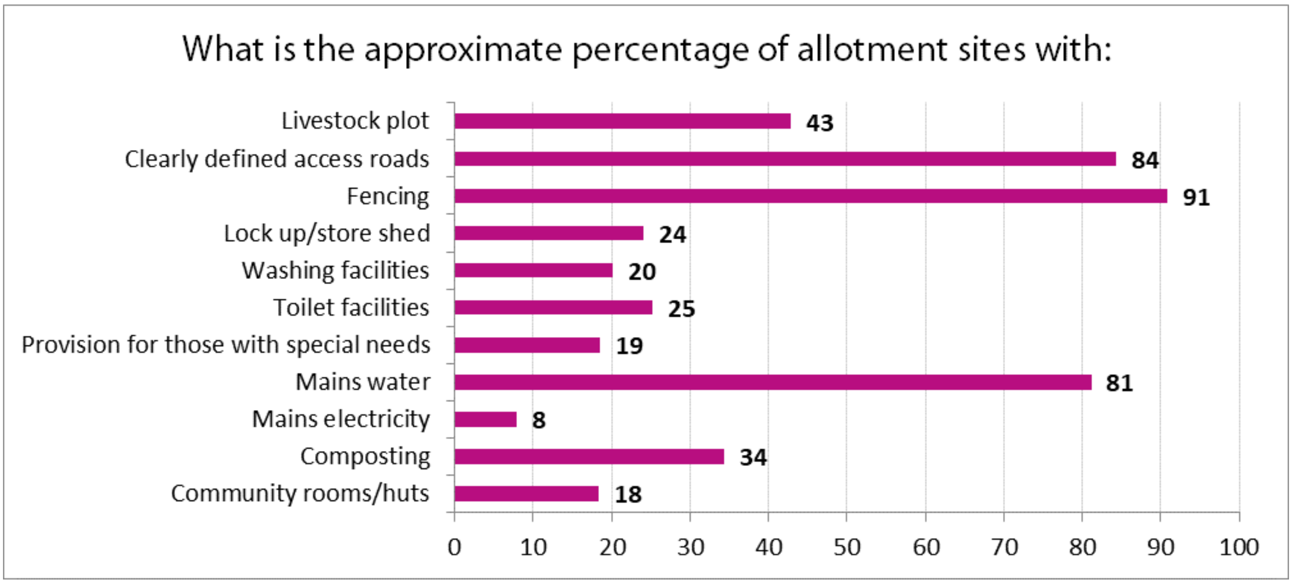
Respondents stated that their budget includes responsibility for the following:



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. It will be interesting to see how the recent increases in energy costs will affect this in the future.

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 some decreases in the numbers of facilities available on sites but this may be a reflection of the fact, more smaller sites are being provided and together with new sites such facilities have not yet been developed or alternatively if some of the smaller sites are run by community groups, affordable.

More sites (**91%**) 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 been a shift from one of a joint responsibility between councils and allotment holders to more of a heavier reliance upon the council, possibly a reflection of COVID when fewer people may have been on site, this may change as normality returns

The full responses are as follows:

As an integral part of grounds maintenance operations/contracts	**68%**
By a dedicated allotments team/person	**21%**
By volunteers	**24%**
By the plotholders/site association	**41%**
As part of rehabilitation programmes (health, offenders etc.)	**9%**
No grounds maintenance is carried out on the sites	**3%**
Other	**3%**

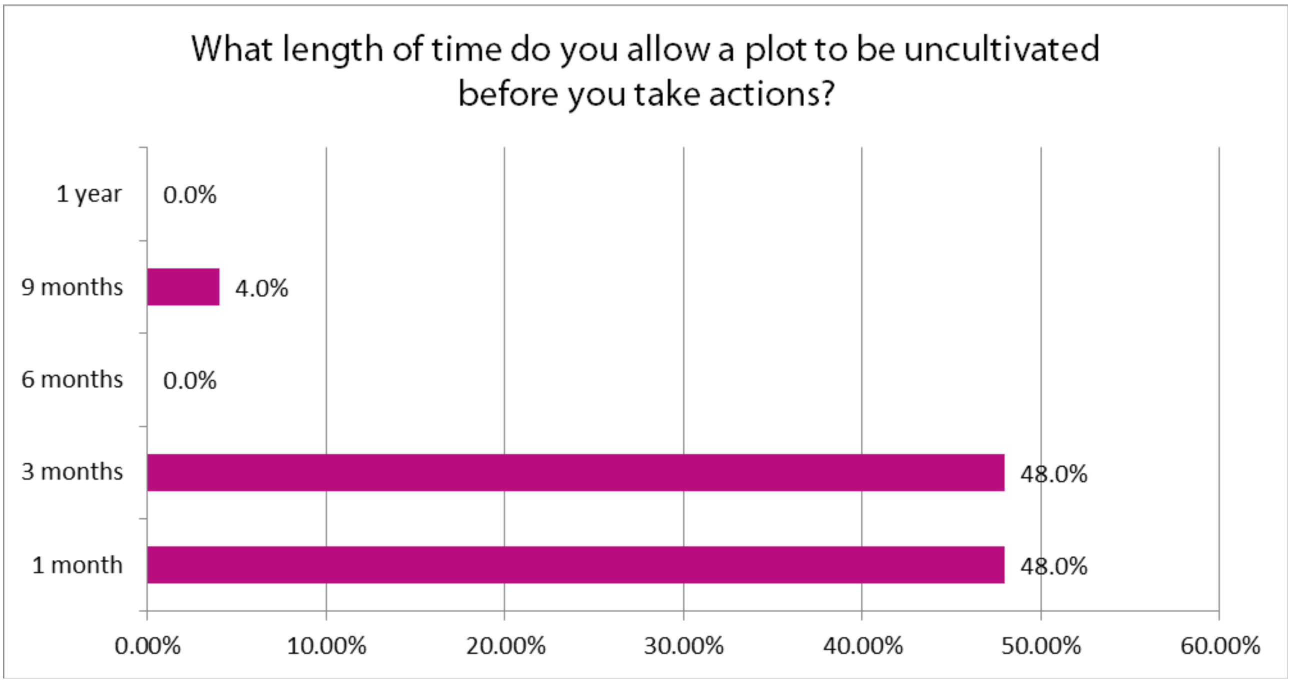
(Please note, respondents could choose more than one option on the survey for this answer).

Monitoring allotments

When asked how grounds maintenance is monitored, the majority stated that this is through inspections / site visits by an allotment officer (**50%**). Other responses included a council officer (**46%**) or a site representative (**53%**). 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 jointly being carried out by dedicated allotment / council officers and site representatives 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 an increase in those reporting that they now only allow one month before action is taken on uncultivated plots compared to previous years, perhaps suggesting the demand for allotments plots is causing less leniency when it is felt a plot is not being used.

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)

35% of respondents restrict plot ownership to a person or a household and **34%** of respondents allow plots to be passed on to families and friends. **68%** of respondents have considered reducing future plot sizes to create more plots. **16%** of respondents stated that plot-holders are required to undertake a probationary period to ensure they can manage their plot effectively.

31% of respondents stated their authority has a policy in place for handling disputes between its tenants and **53%** have a policy in place for handling appeals against notices to quit. **29%** of respondents stated that their authority requires their self-managed sites to have policies in place to address the issues above.

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

42% of respondents stated that they have an allotments strategy, a 6% increase and of the **58%** that haven't currently got a strategy in place, **60%**, stated that the council is planning to develop one within the next 2 years.

65% of Local authorities have a Friends Group / Forum which is a significant increase on the previous years, suggesting communities are beginning to take a wider role in provision and management of allotment plots

56% of respondents now include allotments into their Local Plans and **70%** 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:

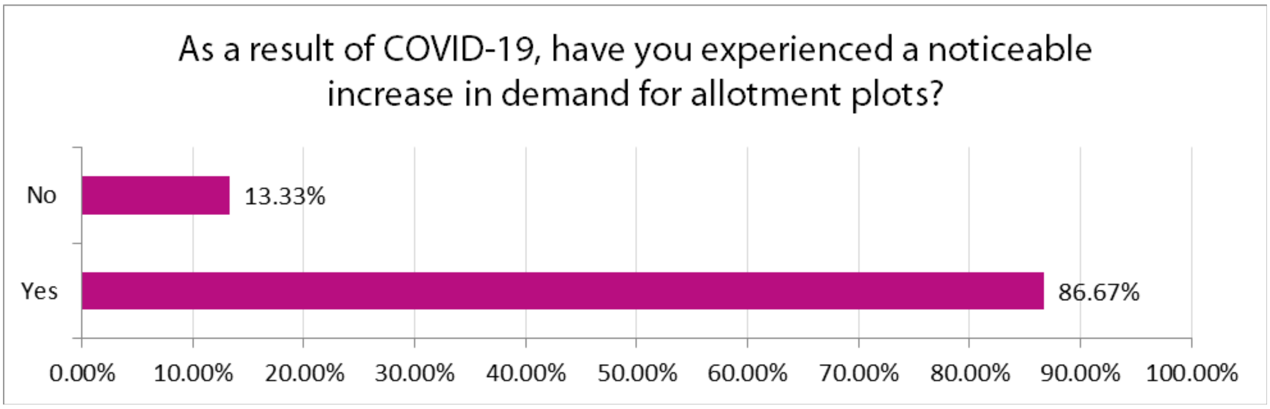
Promoting native crops	**32%**
Planting pollinator friendly species	**58%**
Areas being set aside for wildlife	**68%**
Information on how to improve biodiversity	**68%**
Other	**58%**

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. Interestingly there has also been an increase in the promotion of the growing of native crops. Other responses in relation to promoting biodiversity. included “encouraging bees by allowing beehives on plots” and being part of “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 (**100%**). **60%** stated that they cultivate plots organically and almost **27%** 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.

The Covid-19 impact

Most of the figures contained within the report have been compiled by respondents during 2021-2022. However, the timing off the survey has allowed some data to be collected on the ongoing impact of Covid-19 upon allotment services. The chart below shows the level of increase in demand for allotment plots during the early stages of national lockdown.



The fact almost **87%** of local authorities are still experiencing increases 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 allotments are still higher than pre-Covid, showing how much value and reliance the population were placing on their allotments as a way to relax and reconnect with nature.

APSE Comment

This year’s standout statistics from the APSE State of the Market on Allotments has to be the fact that over **87%** of local authorities are reporting an increase in demand for allotments and continuing high levels of visits. 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.

More recently the impact of the cost-of-living crisis may also drive people to use their allotments more to reduce the cost of their food needs.

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 ensure that food production is sustainable. 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 and is reflected in local authority Biodiversity Plans.

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 in England. 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, but they also recognise that they are able to apply 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 agencies tasked with maintaining the public's health and well-being are seeing the therapeutic value of green space and are willing to invest in facilities such as allotments. 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 the survey identified that 68% of councils who responded, subsidised the cost of the provision of allotments the remaining council simply broke-even. But when one considers the multiple benefits they bring, which have only been increased during the recent 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

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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.

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- 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 2022, please contact Wayne Priestley Principal Advisor for Environmental Services at wpriestley@apse.org.uk