

A large, ripe, yellow-orange pumpkin is the central focus, resting on a bed of green grass and leaves. The pumpkin's skin is textured and shows some minor blemishes. The background is filled with lush green foliage, including large leaves and stems, creating a natural, outdoor setting. The lighting is bright, highlighting the vibrant colors of the pumpkin and the surrounding vegetation.

# a place to grow:

a supplementary document to  
*Growing in the community*



## ministerial foreword by Communities and Local Government (CLG)

### **Barbara Follett, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State**

Public interest in allotments has undergone a recent revival with the growing emphasis on local, seasonal food, healthy eating and reducing the environmental impacts of the food chain. The economic downturn has led to people wanting to find new ways to access cheaper food. All these factors combined have created a greater demand for allotments and local authorities are coming under increasing pressure to provide more allotments to meet this growing trend, at a time when financial resources are being increasingly tightened.

Allotments provide valuable green spaces and community assets that offer opportunities for people to grow their own produce, improve their health and wellbeing and foster community cohesion and inclusion; they can also help to support biodiversity. Government is keen to support local authorities in meeting their duty to provide allotments where there is a demand for them. At the same time, government also recognises that there is a finite amount of open space in urban areas, which is required for a wide range of community uses, including allotments.

This supplementary document, which should be read in conjunction with *Growing in the community*, the existing good practice guidance for allotment officers, is aimed at helping local authorities minimise the length of time an individual has to wait before getting a space to grow. This document provides good practice guidance on how to make the most of existing allotment sites through good management of allotment portfolios, the relevant law and planning procedures concerning new allotment sites and lastly, what 'meanwhile' gardening options exist for individuals to take advantage of, perhaps whilst waiting for an allotment plot to become available.

I very much welcome this timely, supplementary document to *Growing in the community*.



## LGA foreword

### **Cllr Gary Porter, Chairman, LGA Environment Board**

In recent years there has been a surge of interest in growing your own food. This has led to a big rise in demand for allotments as more and more people recognise the multiple benefits of being an allotment holder. Having a local space to grow fresh, affordable food, meet others, share tips and knowledge and stay active are all things that appeal to an increasing number of people.

Local authorities have a duty to respond to demand for allotment spaces and they recognise the positive environmental and social impacts of good allotment provision. However, it is a major challenge to meet current demand with spare land in short supply, growing waiting lists and limited funding.

Local authorities and allotment societies need additional information, good practice examples and guidance to ensure they manage their existing allotment spaces as effectively as possible and identify new sites or alternative growing spaces. This update to the LGA's guide to allotments: *growing in the community*, aims to provide this resource and help support authorities and societies to meet the challenges they are facing.

The LGA is very pleased to commend this supplement to our existing guide. We hope it will be a very useful aid for all those involved with allotments.



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# 1. introduction



The preface to the second edition of the good practice guide for the management of allotments, *Growing in the community* (to be referred to hereafter as the guide), highlights the recent revival of interest in 'growing your own'. The consequent increase in the demand for allotments is reflected in lower vacancy rates and lengthening waiting lists across the UK. Over the two years since the publication of the guide, this trend has intensified. Estimates of waiting lists exceeding 100,000 are widely reported <sup>1</sup>, and few areas have vacant plots. Local authorities have come under increasing pressure to provide new sites, and to accommodate alternative food growing projects where allotments are scarce.

The guide pointed to current thinking on healthy eating, organic food and exercise as factors behind the growing demand for allotments. Over the past two years the links to concern over climate change have strengthened, while recession has added to demand as people seek out cheaper ways of accessing food. Above all, the media have made allotments fashionable, while berating local authorities for not doing more to meet the demands of applicants, who in some areas may have to wait decades before they can gain access to a plot.

This supplementary document seeks to address some of the problems that local authorities (and devolved management associations) are facing as a consequence of the increased demand for allotments. It amplifies some of the messages already included in the guide, and adds new ones for topics which the guide only touches upon lightly, but which have since emerged as key problems in contemporary allotment management.

The management of waiting lists and cultivation standards are obvious examples. In most areas, waiting lists have not been a focus of concern since the oil crisis temporarily boosted demand in the 1970s. Rigorous enforcement of cultivation standards made little sense when tenanted plots were surrounded by dereliction on all sides. Today, however, many aspiring gardeners face the frustration of waiting in a queue that never seems to move, and are angered by the sight of plots they are denied the opportunity to rent not being cultivated as fully as they might be.

On the other hand, local authorities have good reason to be cautious in the face of a fashion that could pass, turning new investments in allotments into an embarrassing and expensive mistake, as over-reaction in the 1970s would have done. The imperatives, therefore, are to make the best possible use of the existing estate before adding to it, and to ensure that the measurement of demand is robust, so that new investments can be justified as an appropriate use of resources.

The overarching aim of this supplementary document is to identify good practice in *minimising the time that people who wish to rent an allotment have to wait* before they can do so. We turn first to key issues in managing the current portfolio of sites to reduce waiting times, including:

- how non-cultivation should be defined and addressed;
- how plot sizes can be adjusted to accommodate more gardeners;
- how waiting lists can be managed fairly and efficiently;
- the need to ensure that devolved management associations are supported in adopting the good practice that the public expects.

The coverage of new sites in the guide is then extended to include:

- fuller discussion of relevant allotment law<sup>2</sup> and planning procedures and strategies;
- the evidence base (which is still in its infancy) that might justify both public and private investment in allotments over other priorities;
- key issues in the detailed design of new sites.

Finally, we look at the implications of providing new allotments on a temporary, non-statutory basis, and at 'meanwhile gardening' alternatives in which people can engage while they wait for an allotment plot, building up their skills and enthusiasm.

# 2. managing the existing portfolio to reduce waiting times

## non-cultivation

The length of the waiting list depends in part on the standard of cultivation expected of existing tenants, and the measures taken to free-up space that is not being properly used. There is a balance to be struck, however: the rights and enjoyment of existing tenants should not be undermined by inspection regimes that are intrusive and ignore the circumstances of the individuals involved.

Tenancy agreements typically include obligations to keep the plot clean, free from weeds, in a good state of fertility and cultivated in a husbandlike manner, and for paths to be kept well trimmed. There are subjective elements embedded here, all making the practical definition of non-cultivation fraught with difficulty.

As a minimum, allotment managers should insist that plots are cultivated in a way that does not interfere in a material way with the enjoyment of neighbouring tenants. Key elements include:

- (i) removal of weed seed-heads before the seed has set;
- (ii) control of pernicious weeds, such as those that spread through the extension of roots or by generating new plants from growing tips in contact with the soil;
- (iii) removal of long grass or detritus that is likely to harbour slugs and snails; and
- (iv) keeping paths free of hazards and ensuring grass paths are trimmed.

In addition, managers may wish to set standards for the proportion of the land put to use in the production of fruit and vegetables, and for the maintenance of residual areas. Care should be taken in setting more detailed requirements, however, given the risk of introducing additional subjectivity and scope for disputes. Sometimes clear and practical criteria for defining non-cultivation have not previously been employed. In such cases, enthusiasm for improving cultivation standards should be tempered, as the authority itself must share the blame for past lax cultivation through implied toleration of neglect.

The ability of tenants to maintain plots to the desired standard depends upon the time that they can commit to the task, their horticultural skills, the size and initial condition of the plot, and the time frame within which they are expected to achieve the standard set.

Recent media attention has sometimes created unrealistic expectations about the time and effort required to keep a plot in good condition. Prospective plotholders should be given a clear indication of what an allotment tenancy will require from them in practice, and be encouraged to acquire basic horticultural skills as early as possible. It would be inappropriate to use proven experience as a criterion for allocating tenancies, but it is essential to detect tenants in difficulties as early as possible.

It is important that an initial record is made of plots that are in sub-standard condition when let, so that the fairness of any subsequent actions in respect of non-cultivation can be demonstrated. The digital camera is the allotment manager's best friend when recording plot conditions. Given the subjectivities within the definition of cultivation, authorities should take care not to set the bar too high when taking decisions that will affect the future of a tenancy. Tenancies should be monitored carefully in the early months, however, to provide an early warning of likely failure.

Allotment law provides clear guidelines on procedures to be followed once a plotholder is in breach of the obligation to cultivate. Local authorities (or their agents) are obliged to use their powers reasonably, however, in ways that pass the three tests of procedural propriety. These are procedural legality (acting within legal powers), natural justice (the key tests of which are absence of bias and the right to a fair hearing), and compliance with the Human Rights Act 1998.

It makes sense to adopt approaches to non-cultivation that may not take full advantage of the powers conferred by allotment law, but are more effective in practice in freeing-up land promptly for cultivation by others. Central to this approach is the presentation of reasonable choices. Tenants who fall below the expected standard should be given the opportunity to remedy the situation, and a clear indication of what is expected of them (by a reasonable deadline) if the tenancy is to continue. Where the tenancy is of a full plot, an offer might be made to reduce the holding to a half plot with immediate effect. Another choice would be to surrender the plot immediately and go back on the waiting list until such time as the tenant's personal circumstances improve.

Where it is justified for social reasons, a 'buddy system' might be used to bring in support for cultivating the plot from a volunteer who is already on site or on the waiting list. Where the quality of life of a frail tenant has been defined by the companionship of the allotment, the possibility should be considered of offering a solution that allows continued access to the allotment community without the obligation to hold a tenancy, such as a life membership scheme.

When a tenant in difficulty refuses these alternatives, however, and yet fails to remedy the situation, then it is appropriate to use the full powers available under the Allotments Acts, with the proviso that the tenant is informed of the full procedure being set in motion, including the appeals procedure. It is essential that associations sharing responsibility under devolved management schemes also have proper appeals procedures in place.

When an allotment tenancy has been terminated, a local authority has the right to reclaim from the departing tenant the cost of restoring the plot to a tenanted condition. This should be made clear to tenants from the outset. The option of a refundable deposit is worth considering, however, as an incentive for plotheolders who cannot cope to surrender the tenancy while the deposit is still repayable.

These issues are expanded on at length, alongside practical examples of good practice, in the free ARI factsheet *Managing Non-Cultivation* (<http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari/resources/ari-factsheets.html>).

## plot size

Offering a tenant experiencing difficulty in meeting cultivation standards a reduction in plot size has already been mentioned. There are other good reasons, however, for offering smaller plots to new tenants than the conventional 250 square metre '10 pole' or '10 rod' plot. Division of full plots into half plots means that twice the number of applicants can be accommodated from the waiting list. People who have many other commitments in life, or who expect their allotment to provide only a portion of their regular intake of fruit and vegetables, or who do not have a family to feed, would be better suited to a half plot than a full plot. Half plots also mean that failing tenants tie up less land from productive use, and more people on site enhances passive security. It is not surprising, therefore, that a policy of offering only half plots to new tenants has been widely and successfully adopted by local authorities with waiting lists for their allotments.

There are limits and caveats, however, that apply to this approach:

1. It should not be imposed retrospectively on existing tenants who took on full plots in good faith, often when actually filling plots was the authority's main priority.
2. It should not be thought of as a means to reduce the overall area required for the provision of allotments, as smaller plots are likely to release latent demand that was previously suppressed by the inability of many people to cope with a full plot. Standards of provision used for planning purposes and expressed in hectares per thousand population should therefore remain unchanged, unless revised demand estimates suggest otherwise.
3. A minority of applicants will insist on a full plot to enable full self sufficiency in fruit and vegetables. There is no requirement on local authorities to accommodate people with these motivations, but it may choose to do so, as part of its environmental or community development policies. It must be understood, however, that self-sufficiency for one person will mean exclusion of others while waiting lists last.
4. There are occasions when local horticultural practices, part of the everyday culture of the allotment, make the half plot less attractive: for example, when large sheds are customary or plots are surrounded by high hedges.
5. Smaller plots mean that more people will be using common facilities such as access ways and car parks, and the overall volume of paperwork required to administer the site will also rise.

These issues also set a limit on the further subdivision of plots beyond the half plot. Some allotment authorities in urban areas with long waiting lists do however offer parcels as small as a quarter plot to new tenants, particularly when they are new to gardening.

If the current popularity of allotments subsides, then it would be possible for tenants who have been restricted to half plots and would like to cultivate more land to do so. Indeed, this would be desirable in order to keep the site as a whole in good order.

During the years when allotments were unfashionable, and dereliction was a common problem, successful tenants were often encouraged to take on additional plots, up to the maximum area permitted by law (either 20 or 40 poles, depending on the population within the local authority's jurisdiction). The fact that some tenants have several plots can be a source of annoyance to people on a waiting list. Once again, however, the local authority should be wary of imposing a retrospective limit, though it can encourage tenants with multiple holdings to surrender some of their land for the public good.

## waiting lists

Allotment waiting lists conventionally operate on the basis that a newly-vacant plot is offered to the person who has been on the waiting list the longest. This rule might be reconsidered, however, in respect of an established plotholder in temporary difficulty, who agrees to surrender a plot voluntarily in return for a priority position on the waiting list, thus making way for somebody else to garden immediately.

People on waiting lists naturally want to know how much longer they have to wait. It should always be possible to tell an applicant where they stand on the list at present – be it directly or by placing this information on-line in a suitable format<sup>3</sup>. Applicants can become frustrated by a perceived lack of progress, however, particularly when they have the mistaken view that they have a right to a plot on demand, and when they see that there are plots around that are not fully cultivated. Concern over non-cultivation can be addressed by making publicly available the local authority's policy on the issue. It can also be made clear that at any one time there are always likely to be plots that are uncultivated, because the current tenant is under notice to quit or a new tenant has only just started.

While some applicants may be very specific about the site they prefer, others may put their names down on several lists. Conversely, others may have moved away, or lost interest in allotment gardening, or their circumstances may mean that they can no longer hope to achieve their gardening ambitions. Waiting lists, therefore, are inherently unreliable. As a result, the process of allocating a newly-vacated plot can be time-consuming, given that the people currently at the top of the list may be unwilling or unable to accept the offer. The argument for creating additional capacity by adding new sites is also weakened, because the figures derived from waiting list data are not sufficiently robust.

Measures to improve the reliability of waiting lists are therefore to be welcomed. As with non-cultivation, these might commence at the time of initial application to join the list, through the provision of information on the demands that a plot is likely to make in terms of time and effort. Once on the list, applicants should be encouraged to keep their record up-to-date. An annual renewal can be solicited in writing to the applicant's last known address, to confirm continuing interest. This also provides an opportunity to give feedback on the progress that the allotments service is making in reducing waiting times, and information on alternative, 'meanwhile' gardening opportunities (see below). This would also be an opportunity to spot multiple applications across different sites, from which a more accurate figure for the total number of people waiting for plots can be derived.

Where lists are long, progress is slow, and inquiries from people on the list take up a large amount of time, the temptation exists to close the waiting list temporarily until the backlog has cleared. Such action, however, generates latent but unmeasured demand, undermining the robustness of the aggregate waiting list figures and thus exposing authorities to allegations that they are seeking to evade their duty to provide sufficient allotments.

Allotment officers and devolved managers should be alert to the temptation for people to evade lists or jump the queue, and robust in their response. Bullying behaviour by applicants seeking advancement on the list should not be tolerated. The most common evasion technique is plot-sharing. This can be wholly benign, but also a means to establish a presence on site and assume an illegal sub-tenancy when the legal plotholder departs. It is difficult to police plot-sharing, particularly on direct-let sites, and there is a fine line between list evasion and simply helping out a friend as a sociable act. It is essential, however, that all plot-sharers are made aware that they have no right to assume a tenancy other than via the waiting list.

Applicants may be interested in engaging in a 'meanwhile' alternative (see below) while waiting for a plot to come vacant. Others may be willing to garden temporarily on a less convenient allotment site with vacant plots in need of attention. Such activities should be encouraged. People who accept these options should be allowed, for example, to retain their positions on the waiting list, until such time as a plot comes vacant for them.

It is important that local authorities have in place procedures for offering newly-vacant plots to people on the waiting list that achieve quick decisions and minimise the time during which plots are left untended, but which are also fair to applicants.

These issues are expanded on at length, alongside practical examples of good practice, in the free ARI factsheet *Managing Waiting Lists* (<http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari/resources/ari-factsheets.html>).

## working with associations

The guide advocates the devolution of management responsibilities to allotment associations wherever they have the capacity and enthusiasm to accept them. It also encourages local authorities to provide ongoing support to associations, which provide an entirely free and voluntary public service on their behalf. Allotment associations are often much better placed to keep a close eye on cultivation standards and to intervene before a problem gets out of hand. It was an allotment association that pioneered the idea of posting its waiting list on the internet (<http://www.priorstreetgardens.org.uk/>).





The performance of associations has come under greater public scrutiny, however, with the increasing demand for allotments, not least because they are often responsible for the most popular sites. Where long-term leases have been granted there has been a tendency in the past for local authorities to lose interest in the service provided to the public on these sites, treating it as something to be considered at the time the lease is renewed. The leases themselves often require associations to provide little more than basic financial information on a regular basis.

While a 'hands off' approach has its benefits, it also carries risks that the increasing demand for allotments can expose. For example, it is clear that many local authorities are not actually in a position to evidence the total demand for allotments in their area, because they do not require devolved management associations to supply reports on their waiting lists. Consequently, the interests of people on these lists are not taken into account in the planning of new sites.

Good practice in working with associations to minimise waiting times therefore requires local authorities to review two key aspects of the relationship:

1. the data they receive (which should include the length of the waiting list at a minimum); and
2. the support which they provide to ensure a common standard of service, irrespective of who delivers it.

It is important that associations are made aware of the standards set by the local authority for any direct-let sites in respect of cultivation standards, plot sizes, waiting lists and other aspects of good practice.

At the same time, care should be taken not to undermine the enthusiasm and authority of management committees, and to acknowledge that associations may have insights and good practice from which the local authority can learn. It is better, therefore, that standards across the service are agreed rather than imposed. Local authorities should work to this end, either directly with associations or with local federations. A system of periodic developmental reviews should also be considered. This provides an opportunity not only to share good practice but also to pass on advice and assistance in other areas such as funding and promotion.

Where a co-operative approach fails, however, or it is clear that the association does not have the capacity to achieve a minimum standard of service, with or without support, then the local authority should be prepared to resume responsibility for the activities concerned. This might be on either a temporary or a permanent basis, as appropriate to the situation. This could amount to a general retreat to a lower level of devolved management, such as management by licence. Alternatively, it could relate to a very limited range of activities. For example the council may resume issuing notices to quit, particularly where there is friction over the consequences of raising cultivation standards.

# 3. providing new allotment sites

## the law on new sites

The provision of new sites is covered by two distinct bodies of law (2): the various 'Allotment Acts' dating back over a century which are specific to this activity, and planning law together with its implementation through local planning policies.

The National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (<http://www.nsalg.org.uk>) provides advice on the Allotments Acts (and the complex interactions between them) to member bodies, and Paul Clayden's *The Law of Allotments* (5th edition, 2008) is the standard text on the subject.

In brief, the duty on local authorities (outside of Inner London) to provide allotment gardens where they consider there is a demand for them is contained in the 1908 Small Holdings and Allotments Act s23. The text of this Act (as with all Acts referred to here) can be freely accessed on the OPSI database (<http://www.opsi.gov.uk>), in a form that conveniently includes all subsequent amendments. Requests for allotments submitted by at least six local taxpayers or electors must be taken into account in considering whether a demand exists. Having determined that there is a demand, the local authority must be able to demonstrate that it has a strategy in place to meet that demand. Although the law imposes no deadline for eventual provision, an interested party may be able to make a claim for judicial review in the High Court against an authority that does not fulfil its duty in a fair and reasonable way.

A local authority can put land it already owns to use as allotments. It also has powers to acquire land for allotments by lease, by compulsory hiring or (failing that) by compulsory purchase under the 1908 Small Holdings and Allotments Act s25 and subsequent legislation not specific to allotments. Clayden (2008, chapter 4) examines the legal procedures for compulsory acquisition of land for allotments in detail. The exercise of these powers, however, depends on resource allocations to meet acquisition costs, and thus on the strength of the case made for prioritising allotments as against other claims on capital budgets (see below). The guide presents the contemporary arguments in favour of allotments, over and above meeting the demands of individuals.

The planning requirements for new allotment sites are more difficult to specify in categorical terms. In the very simplest case, the act of converting land previously used for agriculture into allotment gardens does not constitute development requiring planning permission (following *Crowborough Parish Council v Secretary of State for the Environment* [1981]). Planning permission may be required, however, for allotment gardens established on land not previously under agricultural use. Furthermore, it follows from the need to make a broader case for

allotments in order to help secure the capital resources required, and to satisfy the demands of new ploholders for good facilities, that ancillary investments (such as vehicle access and fencing) are likely to be made that do constitute development.

Planning permission may also be required for sheds and greenhouses, particularly if they are large or on a permanent base. However, the erection of sheds or other buildings by a local authority may be 'permitted development' that does not require a planning application to be made. Where substantial buildings are to be included in a new site they will be subject to the Building Regulations, but some buildings may also be partially exempt as agricultural buildings used exclusively for storage.

Given these uncertainties, therefore, it is advisable to consult the planning authority in advance of development. They should be sent a full plan of what is proposed, to ensure that planning permission is duly sought if it is deemed to be necessary, given the facts of the particular case. Planning Aid provides useful guidance on the issue of permissions (see for example <http://www.planningaidforlondon.org.uk/?idno=22586>).

The planning process inevitably opens the door to objections from third parties who believe their own interests will be materially affected by the conversion of land to allotments. The issue of how best to address such objections through pre-emptive measures is addressed in a later section.

## new sites and green space strategies

The guide strongly advocates that local authorities prepare allotment strategies, which will guide the development of the allotments service, but also form part of the broader strategic policy for green spaces. PPG17 encourages local authorities to undertake robust assessments of the need for different forms of open space. The recent escalation in the demand for allotments demonstrates that 'need' is not static, and thus not easily captured by a fixed standard. It is good practice to build into both policy and practice sufficient flexibility to enable land to be redistributed between different green spaces uses, to accommodate changing demands, and with co-location a key tactic. This will help to ensure that standards can not only be modified, but also met. Recognition should also be given to the quality of the soil that is both needed for and produced through successful cultivation. Wherever possible, land that has previously been used for allotments or other forms of cultivation should be kept in a condition where it can be returned to that use at a future date.

The guide suggests that standards should be set using 'plots per household' rather than in 'hectares per household'. The pressure of waiting lists on plot sizes makes this advice questionable, because smaller plots facilitate the realisation of demand that was previously latent, as well as demand recorded via waiting lists. As noted earlier, reductions in plot sizes should not, therefore, be seen as a justification for reducing the overall area assigned to allotments. Where plot sizes are no longer fixed, a standard set in 'hectares per household' is to be preferred as a more stable basis for planning.

Later in this update we address the issue of 'meanwhile' gardening projects as a temporary solution to waiting lists. Provision for these also needs to be taken into account in planning strategies. These projects can cut across standard planning thinking, in part because they imply sequential rather than fixed use. They can also occupy spaces that are not usually considered part of the green space portfolio, such as brownfield sites awaiting redevelopment. Provision for such projects will therefore have to be considered in strategies other than those for green space as well.

## prioritising new sites

The provision of new sites to reduce waiting times requires resources. In allocating resources of land and capital to this end, local authorities need to be able to defend their priorities in the face of many competing claims.

There are clearly great differences in the problem of securing land for allotments between rural and urban areas. In the former, conversion of farmland to allotments by parish councils holding the land under freehold or lease can be a realistic option. Farmers can also lease land direct to individuals or groups as food growing spaces as a commercial diversification activity. In urban areas, the opportunities to convert land directly from agriculture use are limited or non-existent, so the most likely source of new land is from within the existing public open space estate. In both town and country, however, the development of land for allotments is likely to provoke opposition from other parties whose enjoyment of the same land (as accessed or viewed space) may be compromised.

The fencing off of allotments is usually justified as essential to protect the allotment holders' personal property, and to ensure that cultivation can proceed without damage from intruders. The granting of exclusive right of access to a limited number of gardeners, however, means that others who might be accustomed to using the same space, to walk the dog, picnic or play games, must find somewhere else. Appeals to the benefits of allotments (as documented in the guide) are unlikely to impress people who will not share those benefits, but who may instead find their opportunities to undertake preferred activities with equally valid benefits curtailed.

Where possible, therefore, compensatory mechanisms should be considered. These could include the upgrading of adjacent or nearby spaces to enhance their value to users with other interests, along with careful design to ensure that popular routeways are preserved. The guide advocates co-location of new allotments with other recreational facilities, to enable informal public surveillance and flexibility in case the demand for allotments should change in the future.

The concept of co-location might be expanded to include complementary activities within the boundaries of the allotment site, to increase the number and diversity of direct beneficiaries. These could include communally-managed gardens and dedicated facilities for schools and people with disabilities. 'Friends' groups could be established for people who would like to be involved in helping out on the site without the commitments that plotholding entails. This builds on the idea of 'lifetime membership' sometimes afforded to retiring gardeners who wish to maintain social ties. Activities of this kind can also go some way to addressing concerns about visual intrusion, particularly when combined with formal landscaping and strict rules on construction standards for sheds and the management of wastes. They could also (as with many continental sites) produce amenities that people choose to view for pleasure, with the added benefit of opportunities to exchange pleasantries and receive surplus produce.





The capital cost of a new allotment site can be substantial, over and above any cost of acquiring the land. In addition to grading and sub-dividing the land there are fencing, haulageways, water supply, car parking, access ways and permissions to be taken into account. While costs will vary with local conditions and the facilities to be provided, the capital cost of £2,000 per 250 square metre plot estimated by one local authority for developing its new site may be taken as indicative. For parish councils in particular, this is an expensive proposition (both financially and politically) given the small number of direct beneficiaries. Aggregate costs can be reduced by encouraging those who will benefit from the plots to get involved in developing and running the site, and sharing costs with any co-located facilities. This may in turn enhance the case for grant funding. Costs per plot (and hence the implied subsidy per plotholder) can be reduced by limiting plot sizes. Authorities may also wish to include within the calculation of rent an allowance for the depreciation of the capital invested.

The rental income, of course, is only part of the benefit to the community that flows from allotments. The contributions to biodiversity, healthy eating, exercise, active ageing and many other public policy agendas are discussed at length in the guide. Very little research has been undertaken, however, to quantify these benefits and set them against other ways of investing public funds, be it in alternative forms of green space or in other ways. The Allotments Regeneration Initiative maintains a library of the latest evidence in the resources section of its website (<http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari>).

## design of new sites

The detailed design of new sites involves striking the right balance between the preferences of new allotment holders and the interests of the broader public. It should also incorporate sound environmental practices, drawing on sources such as the *Big Wildlife Garden* website (<http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/advice/wildlifegardening>).

New plotholders are likely to prioritise access, good infrastructure and site security, while the general public will prefer a design that creates an asset for the whole community (for which see the discussion of co-location in the previous section), and that is sensitive to the quality of the local landscape.

The perimeter of the site should incorporate planting wherever possible. Well-laid hedges in native species can enhance the external view and add to the biodiversity value of a site. Where a combination of hedges and passive security is unlikely to be sufficient to protect crops and other property, however, good-quality fencing will also be needed (palisade fencing is recommended), and gates with solid locks.

While there are sound environmental reasons for encouraging access to the allotment on foot or bicycle, there will need to be vehicle access and parking for the benefit of plotholders with restricted mobility, and to enable deliveries of manure and other essentials.



Whether plots should be laid out in the traditional grid pattern or in some other configuration is a matter of debate. Some have advocated that a softer, curved layout is more in keeping with allotments as a form of gardening for leisure. Given the current emphasis on flexible plot sizes, however, the grid does have the advantage that the subdivision of parcels within the basic 250 square metre frame is simple to accomplish. The paths between plots should be of a width adequate for access by wheelchair. The plots themselves should be clearly demarcated and numbered.

A mains water supply is important, particularly where small plots make the construction of large sheds undesirable and thus rainfall collection, which is otherwise environmentally desirable, difficult in practice. Water tanks should be installed in compliance with the standards specified by the local water company, and in sufficient number to enable access by gardeners with physical impairments, and covered to prevent accidents. The need to provide toilets will depend on whether alternative facilities are already accessible in the vicinity; where there are none, then the most environmentally friendly alternative is the composting toilet.

Where sheds, greenhouses and polytunnels are not supplied but are permitted, there should be clear design and/or supplier guidelines to ensure the overall quality of the construction on site and to enhance the external view.

There should also be a policy on composting and waste disposal, though the details (and associated infrastructure) will depend in part on site conditions (eg is there an otherwise unusable space that could be used for communal composting?).

Ways of cultivating the plots themselves that achieve maximum environmental gain alongside the production of a rich crop of fruit and vegetables should be given positive support. For example, a section of the site may be reserved for use by organic growers. For other ways that plottolders on new (and existing) sites can be encouraged to reduce their environmental impact by adopting green gardening practices, visit <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Environmentandgreenerliving/Greenerhomeandgarden/Greenergarden/index.htm>.

# 4. meanwhile gardening

## temporary allotment sites

Many local authorities have experience of 'temporary allotments'. These are located on land that was not acquired for the purpose of providing allotments (which would thereby acquire statutory protection), but which is destined for an alternative use, such as a cemetery. There are no additional legal impediments to local authorities setting up temporary allotments on suitable sites under their control in order to help meet current levels of demand. Authorities will also be aware, however, that attempts to close temporary allotments of long standing can be contentious. There have been repeated calls for authorities either to declare an end use for temporary sites or make them statutory, to end the uncertainty about the future that tenants on these sites often complain of. The lesson for local authorities considering providing temporary sites, be it on their own ground or on land on short-term lease, is to make both the end use and the likely life expectancy of the site clear from the outset.

## support for alternative gardening projects

In areas where the demand for allotments far outstrips supply, and particularly in Inner London, where there is no duty placed upon local authorities to provide allotments, waiting lists are very long. Here the only realistic hope for aspiring growers in the short term lies with alternative gardening projects. These are currently attracting a great deal of popular attention. The Womens' Environmental Network (<http://www.wen.org.uk>) has for years supported food growing within areas of social housing in London's East End. The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (<http://www.farmgarden.org.uk>) provides similar support to urban farms and gardens throughout Great Britain. The Capital Growth project (<http://www.capitalgrowth.org>) aims to create 2012 new growing spaces in time for the London Olympics, and the Landshare project (<http://landshare.channel4.com/>), a national initiative to match aspiring growers with landowners, has already attracted many thousands of inquiries. Similar local meanwhile gardening projects have sprung up in many cities (such as Bristol) and more rural areas (such as the Isle of Wight).

This is a fast-evolving sector, and as yet there is only a limited evidence base from which to judge good practice or to determine the proper role of local authorities in general, and allotment officers in particular, in providing support and encouragement. Certainly the emergence of these projects cannot be treated as a means to evade the duty to provide allotments. But there are good arguments for supporting these projects as a complement to allotment gardening, and particularly in respect of the effective management of waiting lists. For some, the practical engagement with gardening offered by these projects will be sufficient to satisfy their needs. They may even prove more appealing than allotment gardening, particularly when the opportunity exists for group activity and in very close proximity to home. For others, practical exposure to the time demands of gardening may lead to a more realistic appraisal of their own capacity to manage a full allotment plot, rendering waiting lists a more reliable measure of underlying demand.

Their existence outside of statutory provision puts these projects in a much better position to raise grant funding. This increases the aggregate capital resources available to support community-based gardening activity well beyond what the authority itself can provide, without laying claims on the allotments budget.

Local authorities can support alternative gardening projects by offering temporary access to local authority owned land that is not suited for the creation of allotments. This may be due to the restricted scale of the site, or difficulties that would arise from attempts to exclude broader public access. Authorities can encourage other statutory bodies to follow suit. Beyond the public sector, the recession in the construction industry opens up the possibility of exploiting privately held stocks of undeveloped land for temporary gardening use. This could be in bare earth where the land is uncontaminated or in containers such as raised beds and builders bags when soil is inaccessible or suspect. Projects such as the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens' proposed Community Land Bank (<http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/news/474-community-land-bank-solution>) are designed to facilitate the temporary release of land for community food growing purposes.

# footnotes

- 1 The most accurate estimate available is that 76,300 names were on waiting lists in England as of the first quarter of 2009, but this estimate excludes waiting lists for sites run by town and parish councils or under devolved management agreements ([http://www.transitiontownwestkirby.org.uk/files/ttwk\\_nsalg\\_survey\\_09.pdf](http://www.transitiontownwestkirby.org.uk/files/ttwk_nsalg_survey_09.pdf)).
- 2 The discussion of allotment law included in this update pertains to England and Wales only: separate legislation covers Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- 3 There are issues relating to confidentiality, data protection and human rights legislation that would need to be satisfied before the names of individuals on the waiting list could be posted on line, and consent would also have to be obtained from the individuals concerned. An alternative would be to use a signifier (eg a waiting list number) known only to the applicant and the authority instead.

## main guide

*Growing in the community* – the LGA's good practice guide to the management of allotments - provides information on the policy framework and legislation, together with a wealth of innovative and interesting practice and useful tips for allotment officers and societies. The guide is available as a printed booklet (price £15 for local authorities, allotment associations and holders and not-for-profit organisations, or £25 for others) by contacting LGconnect: 020 7664 3131 or [info@lga.gov.uk](mailto:info@lga.gov.uk)

The guide is also available to order online as a PDF (£15) on: <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/publications/publication-display.do?id=5403533>



a place to grow:  
a supplementary  
document to  
*growing in the  
community*



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