association for public service excellence

State of the Market 2023

Local Authority Allotment Services

Briefing 23/37

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Local Authority Allotment Services

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About APSE

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) is a not-for-profit local government body working with over 300 councils throughout the UK.

Promoting excellence in public services, APSE is the foremost specialist in local authority frontline services and operates one of the UK's largest research programmes in local government policy and frontline service delivery matters.

1 State of the Market 2023

APSE conducted an online allotment survey in early Summer 2023 which follows on from a series of previous surveys which were conducted in 2022, 2021, 2020, 2019, 2018, 2017, 2016, 2015, 2013, 2012, 2010 and 2008. The 2023 survey asks similar questions to the previous surveys to allow for comparisons to be drawn from previous years but also included some new questions about 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.

The following summarises responses to a series of questions on the numbers, types, and demand for allotments. The total number of respondent councils was 58 which was comparable to 2022 and shows that the survey has statistical validity with regards to its findings.

2 Number and management of allotments

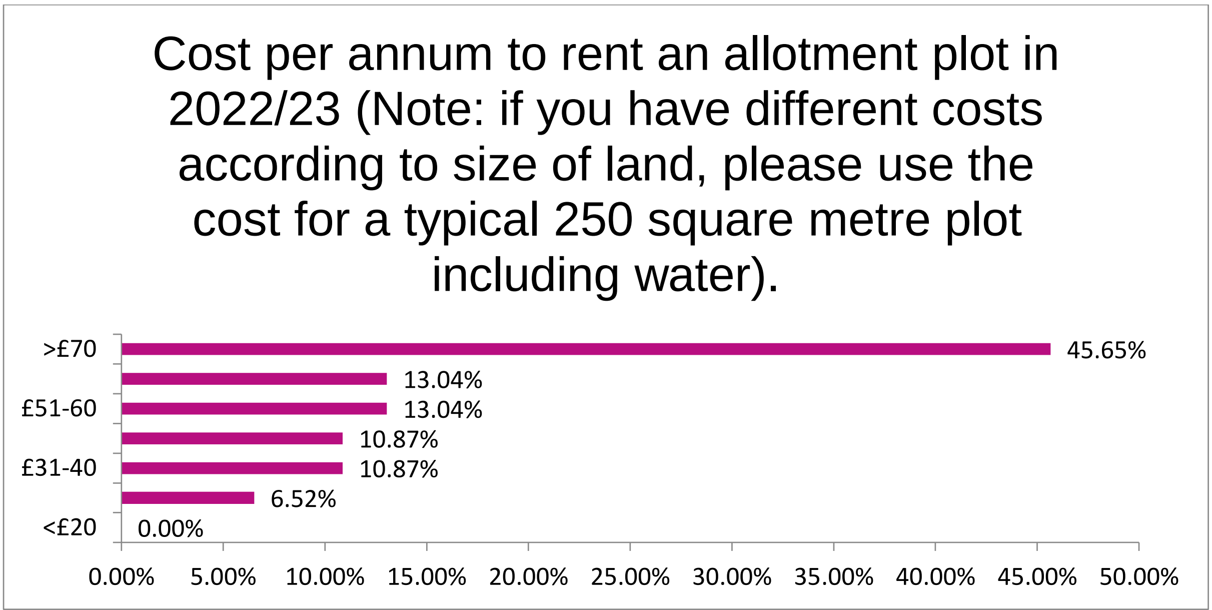
When asked about the management of allotments **96%** of respondents answered that they have council owned allotments within their authority showing that local authorities still see the provision of allotments as a role they wish to support.

In terms of management of the allotments, **36%** answered that they have allotments which are directly managed by a council officer, which is a decrease of 5% on last year's results,6% stated that allotment sites are managed through a site committee or association (a **7%** decrease on 2022). **58%** of respondents stated that they have a mix of council and site committee or association managed sites, which is a **12%** rise on last year's survey results, suggesting that there has been a growth in the number of allotment sites adopting a joint council/site committee management of allotment sites.

Results also showed that **22%** of local authority respondents, who **do not** currently manage sites, had received requests for new allotment provision. In 2023, 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. Local authorities have indicated they may be able to deliver these by reassessing their current sites to look at reducing plot size and creating more plots, potential expansion, or identifying new potential sites on Local Authority land. Many are considering and, in some cases, already working with other landowners such as Housing Associations, Faith Groups, and Educational establishments to encourage and support them to provide allotments in areas of demand and supporting emerging community groups to seek to develop sites.

3 Cost of allotments

The chart below shows there was a wide range of prices for renting allotments, but the largest proportion of local authorities (almost 50%) are now charging over **£70** per annum to rent an allotment in 2022-23. The fact there is a wide variety of charges, as shown below, 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 break even by covering 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 2023/24 as compared to 2022/23. 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.

Most respondents **(69%)** replied that the cost for an allotment is directly related to the area of the allotment (e.g., square metres) whilst **22%** 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, **22%** of respondents stated they had increased allotment costs above the standard level of inflation, which is an increase of **11%** on 2022, again perhaps suggesting moves to at least make the provision of allotments cost neutral.

In 2022, **28%** of respondents now state that they will be continuing to increase allotment costs over the next five years, compared to **26%** in 2022, and a further **35%** replied that they were currently reviewing allotment costs.

Despite these increases only **25%** reported that the provision of allotments would become cost neutral because of their charges. This is in fact a **5%** fall on 2022 figures; therefore, it does appear that despite proposed price increases to allotment holders most local authorities are still subsidising the provision of allotments they are responsible for. No authority reported that they would return a surplus, as was last the case in 2021.

There was a split in the respondents who offered concessionary prices. **64%** reported that they did offer concessions, which is an increase of **8%** on 2022, which is perhaps not surprising considering the health and well-being benefits allotments bring, and this is despite the fact that as so many sites are subsidised, offering concessions may not be economically viable in terms of managing service costs but this seems to be secondary to the health and well-being and environmental benefits allotments bring. This could also reflect the ongoing cost of living crisis with local authorities keen to support vulnerable people and economically disadvantaged groups.

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

- **67%** offer discounts for pensioners, over 60's and/or retired people. The majority of these offer a 40-50% discount.
- **60%** offer discounts to the unemployed or those on income support. The majority of these offer a 40-50% discount.
- **38%** offer discounts to people with disabilities. The majority offer a 40-50% discount.
- **32%** offer discounts to students. Of these, the majority offer a discount of 40-50%.

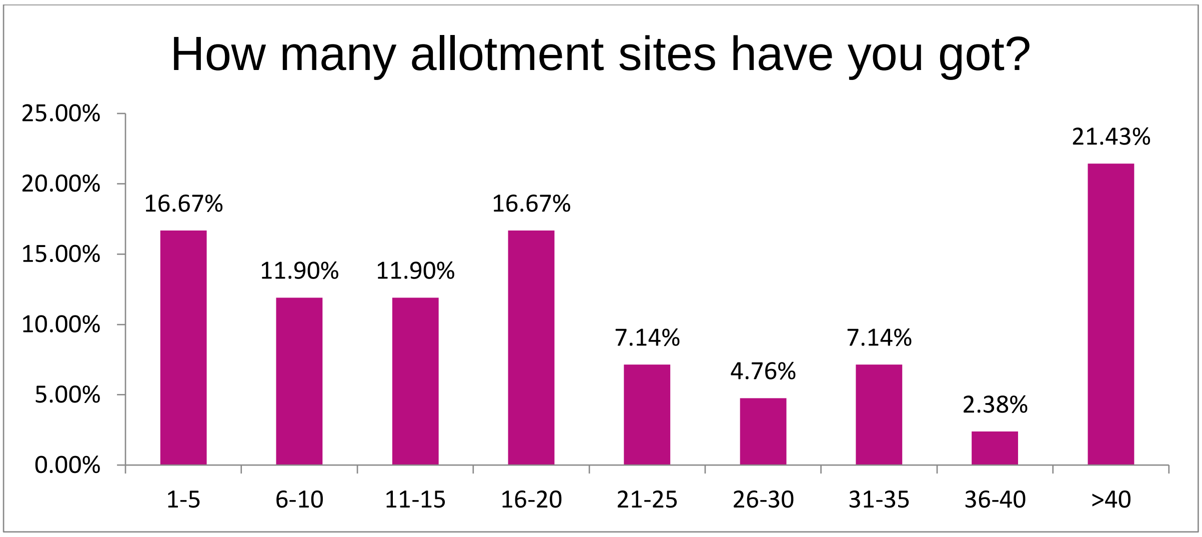
4 Facilities for the disabled

55% of respondents reported that they provided facilities for the disabled. This is against a figure of 72% in 2022. This is an area where ongoing monitoring is required.

Where disabled facilities are provided, then the types of facilities include raised beds, disabled toilets, plots closer to the entrance, ramps and improved pathways and 'buddy' systems.

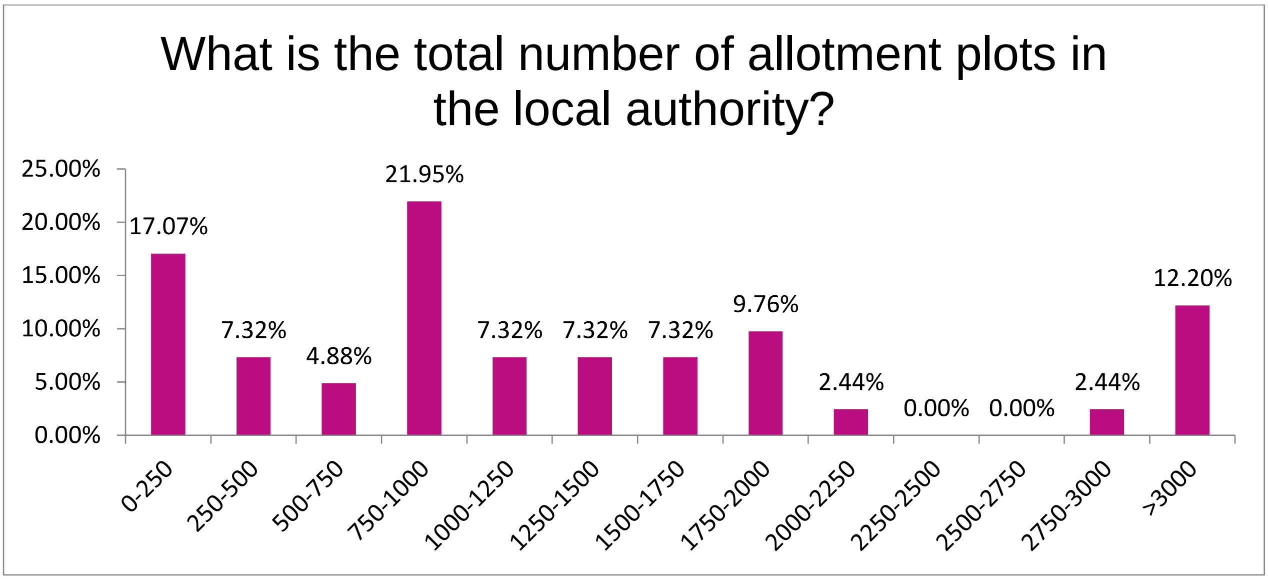
5 Number and size of allotments

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 local authorities now having between 11 – 20 sites and over 40 sites. This may suggest councils are developing more sites as a means to meet demand which will result in 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 0-250 and 750-1000 categories. Without more detailed information and local authority returns, it is difficult to say with any certainty whether numbers have increased significantly other than overall numbers appear to have remained consistent over the past two years. The only summation we can make is that the increases in plot numbers may be due to plots being halved rather than new sites being created.



In terms of the size of plots available, **29%** stated that they have a standard size for a plot, and out of these, the most common sizes were: 100-149 square metres (**25%**) 200-249 square metres (**22%**), and 250=299 again 22%. Noticeably there has been an increase in smaller plots which may reflect a policy to reduce plot sizes to reduce waiting lists and to make plots more manageable., indeed 90% of respondents said they had reduced plot sizes where possible, mostly by half which is a significant increase on 2022. In some instances, quarter plots were being offered, being seen as starter plots and if successfully cultivated, then larger plots may be offered in the future if requested. 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 **30%** of respondents having over 1000 people in the waiting list for an allotment. 22% reported waiting lists of between 500-800 and 15% reported having up to 300 people on their waiting lists. It is clear that demand is still high for allotment plots the highest waiting lists often being in large urban areas.

Most respondents (**88%**) 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 **69%** stated that over 18 months was the average, which is an increase of **11%** on 2022 when the figure was **58%**. 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 outstripping the ability to provide enough plots.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that **89%** of respondents stated that new tenancies are restricted to people living within the local authority area. Again, this is a significant increase on 2022 when this figure was 72%.

6 Future increases in the number of allotments

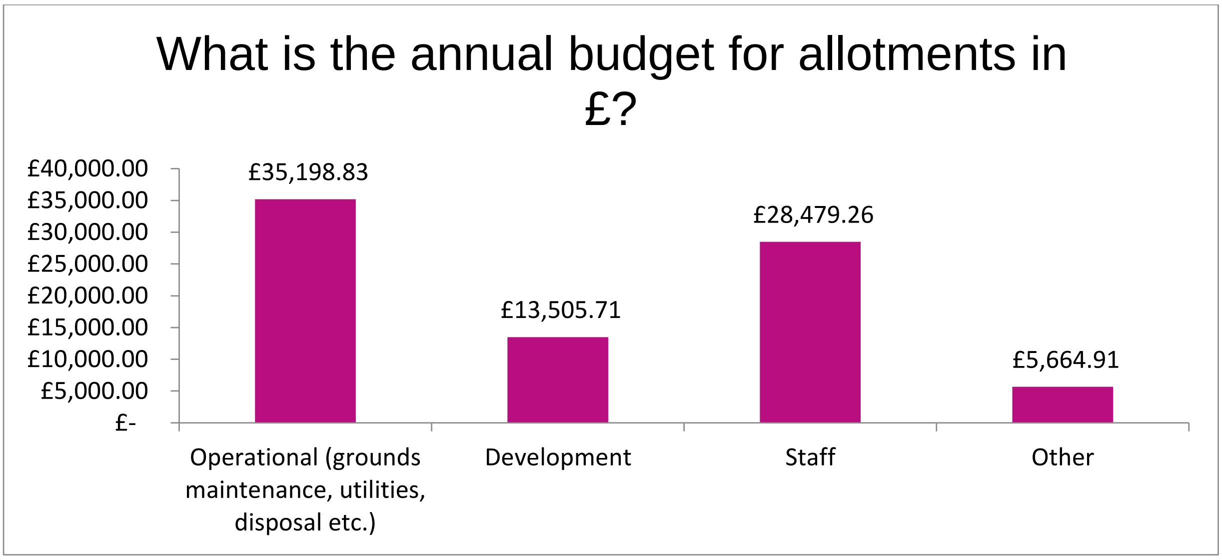
54% of respondents stated that their council plans to increase the number of allotments as opposed to **42%** in 2022. From those respondents who stated that the number of allotments is planned to increase, the method of doing this is shown in the table below:

Direct provision by the council for additional plots	**75%**
Provision by builders/developers as part of a housing/planning policy	**30%**
Provision by community groups supported/facilitated by council	**45%**
Provision by other council departments (e.g., Education, Social Work) as part of a healthy lifestyles/eco-schools/health type project	**20%**
Other	**5%**

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 departments as part of health and well-being projects is still seen as an important contributor to new site developments. However, the figures do suggest that councils are still taking a more proactive role in providing new allotment sites and plots.

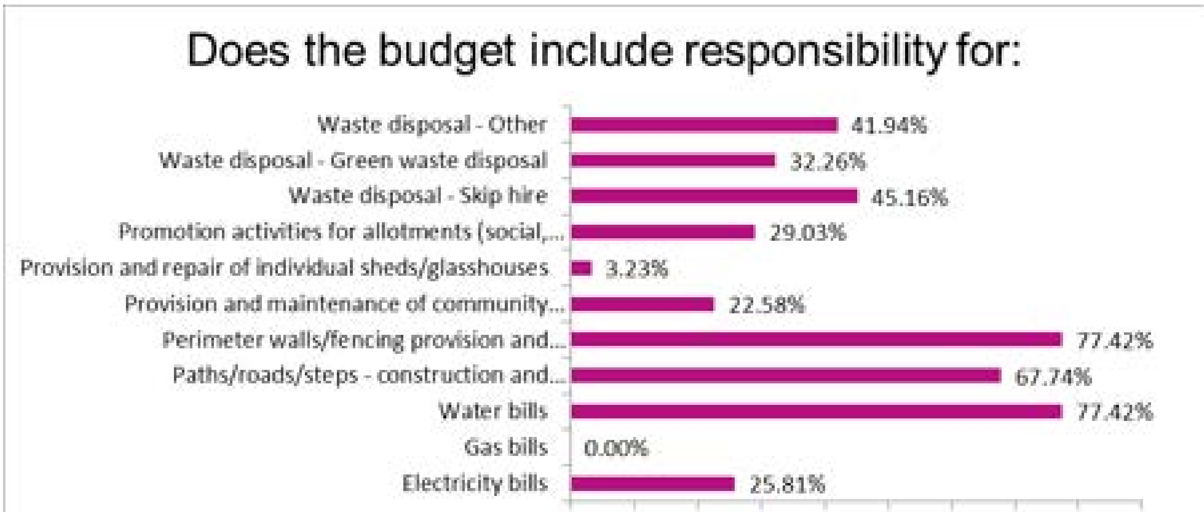
7 Budgets for allotments

The average annual budgets for allotments were stated as follows:



These figures show that the major changes have been in increased operational costs at £35,198.83 in 2023 compared to £25,276.48 in 2022 and a noticeable decrease in development costs at £13,5050.71 in 20023 compared to £35,893.64 in 2022. The reduction in development costs is probably a reflection of plot halving leading to less new site developments.

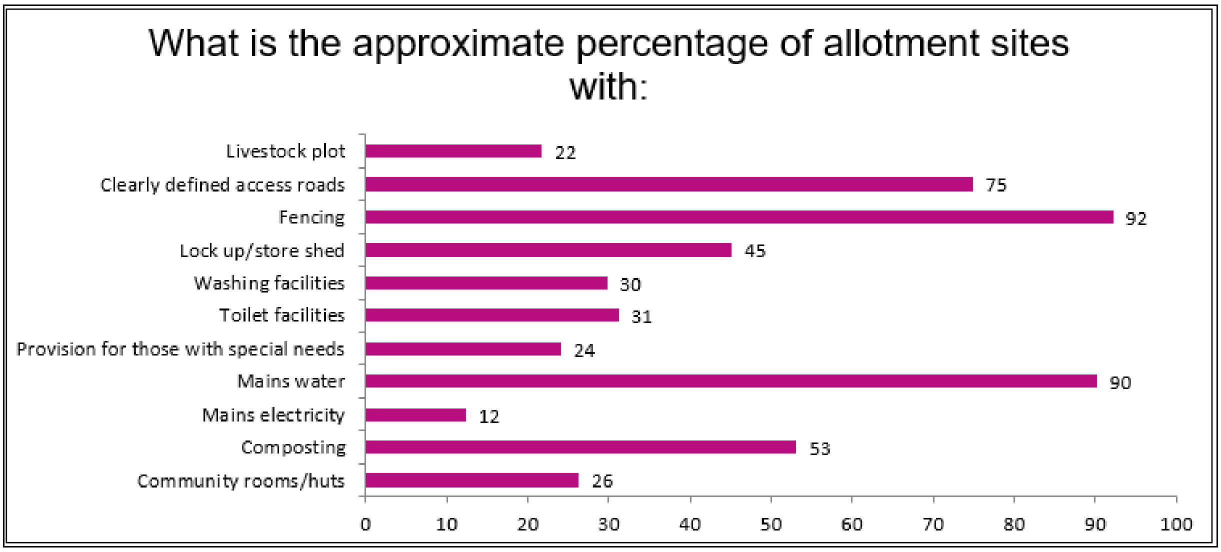
Respondents stated that their budget includes responsibility for the following:



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 and 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 personally 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. Notably of the comments received to this question most respondents did comment on water bills being as the cost they would most like to see reduced.

8 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 reflect the fact that 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.

This clearly shows sites taking more responsibility for managing their waste in not only, a more environmentally sustainably manner, but also reducing the financial costs of waste disposal.

Regarding site maintenance, there seems to be a shift from one of a joint responsibility between councils and allotment holders to more of a heavier reliance upon the council, possibly a reflection of the previous impacts 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	**70%**
By a dedicated allotments team/person	**33%**
By volunteers	**30%**
By the plotholders/site association	**61%**
As part of rehabilitation programmes (health, offenders etc.)	**24%**
No grounds maintenance is carried out on the sites	**6%**
Other	**6%**

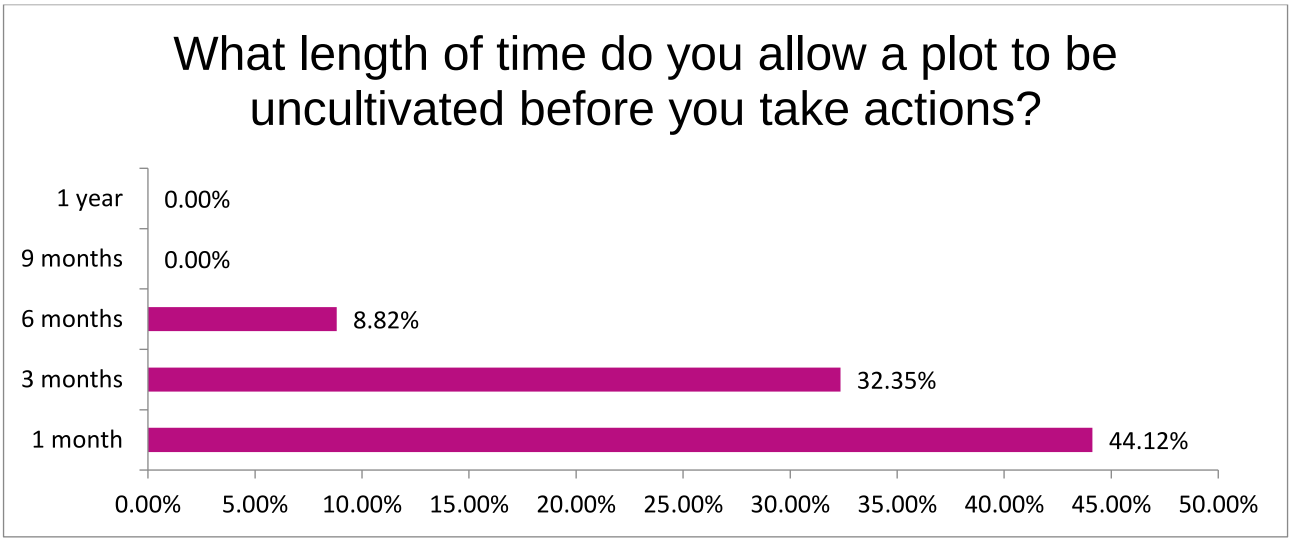
(Please note, respondents could choose more than one option on the survey for this answer).

9 Monitoring allotments

When asked how grounds maintenance is monitored, the majority stated that this is through inspections and or site visits by an allotment officer (**60%**). Other responses included a council officer (**40%**) or a site representative (**57%**). 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 daily by allotment holders themselves. Inspection frequencies vary from monthly to annually, but many stated that they 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 now **do not allow** plot holders to have more than one plot, but where they are multiple plots still owned this is usually due to the following reasons:

- 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)

59% of respondents restrict plot ownership to a person or a household and **38%** of respondents allow plots to be passed on to families and friends. **85%** of respondents have considered reducing future plot sizes to create more plots (68% in 2022). **12.5%** of respondents stated that plot-holders are required to undertake a probationary period to ensure they can manage their plot effectively.

65% of respondents stated their authority has a policy in place for handling disputes between its tenants (31% in 2022) and **72%** have a policy in place for handling appeals against notices to quit (53% in 2022). **62%** of respondents stated that their authority requires their self-managed sites to have policies in place to address the issues above (29% in 2022). The large increases in policies for handling disputes and appeals certainly seems to suggest that allotment sites are now much more rigorously being managed and monitored due to the growing demand for plots.

10 Security

Plot-holders themselves generally manage the security on allotment sites (**60%**) with **46%** of respondents stating that they don't actively manage security. **3%** stated that they have a 'plot watch' scheme or something similar. The major change this year has been the fact respondent said they now involve park rangers (6%) or community wardens (3%) 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.

11 Allotment strategy

49% of respondents stated that they have an allotments strategy, a 7% increase on 2022, and of the **51%** that haven't currently got a strategy in place, almost half stated that the council is planning to develop one within the next 2 years.

69% 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.

50% of respondents now include allotments into their Local Plans and **61%** have the value of allotments recognised within their Health and Well-Being strategies.

12 Biodiversity

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

Promoting native crops	**38%**
Planting pollinator friendly species	**56%**
Areas being set aside for wildlife	**72%**
Information on how to improve biodiversity	**56%**
Other	**58%**

The setting aside of areas for wildlife has increased and the provision of information on biodiversity and planting pollinator friendly crops are also clearly being promoted. Other responses in relation to promoting biodiversity, included "encouraging bees by allowing beehives on plots" and being part of "networks of beekeepers". 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 (84%). A further 44% stated that they cultivate plots organically and some 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 fact most 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 are still placing on their allotments to relax and reconnect with nature.

13 APSE Comment

Some of the key findings in this year's State of the Market survey is that demand for allotment plots is continuing to remain high and this is reflected by the large increase in those local authorities who are halving standard sized allotment plots to address this demand.

Interestingly, local authorities are reporting despite offering reduced size plots they are receiving little negative feedback as most people are seemingly happy to work smaller plots, stating that they are more manageable and probably resulting in less waste of overproducing crops beyond the needs of the plot holder. This approach also hopes to reduce waiting lists but from comments received it does appear that many are still seeing long waiting lists and lengthy waiting times to receive a plot. This constant and in some areas growing demand, shows the importance of allotments to reconnect with nature, as well as benefiting from the health and well-being gains tending such spaces brings. It may also reflect the renewed interest in the public being more self-sustainable, using allotments to grow their own fruit and vegetables.

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. This 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 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.

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, reducing food costs, providing valuable soakaways in times of heavy rain as well as having a value to pollinators and other wildlife. Therefore, if managed in an environmentally sensitive manner, allotments bring considerable benefits to addressing the negative effects of climate change but also addressing the ecological crisis facing the UK with regards to declining biodiversity levels. This approach has now become a key responsibility taken on by many allotment sites and is reflected in local authority Biodiversity Plans and Climate Emergency Plans.

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.

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.

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. Considering 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 some limited help, through partnership working with agencies, such as the NHS, who are providing important additional and supportive funding as they are recognising the health benefits the physical activity and social well-being being an allotment holder can bring, is of course welcome. More and more agencies tasked with maintaining the public's health and well-being are also seeing the therapeutic value of green space and are willing to invest in facilities such as allotments.

More recently, 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. 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, and Biodiversity Net Gain requirements which become mandatory in November 2023 may also provide additional funding opportunities to create new allotment spaces.

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 councils simply broke-even. But when one considers the multiple benefits allotments bring, which were highlighted during the pandemic, then they are acknowledged as being a key community asset and one which residents, allotment holders and agencies across the country are increasingly helping to create and sustain.

Wayne Priestley
APSE Principal Advisor

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If you require any further information on the findings of this State of the Market survey 2023, please contact Wayne Priestley Principal Advisor for Environmental Services at wpriestley@apse.org.uk or Matt Ellis, press lead on mellis@apse.org.uk.

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