



Can You Dig it?

Meeting community demand for allotments

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New Local Government Network (NLGN) is an independent think tank that seeks to transform public services, revitalise local political leadership and empower local communities. NLGN is publishing this report as part of its programme of research and innovative policy projects, which we hope will be of use to policy makers and practitioners. The views expressed are however those of the authors and not necessarily those of NLGN.

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Introduction

Allotments have played an important part in British history, particularly in the “Dig for Victory” campaign in World War II which saw people grow their own produce to boost their food supply. However, despite a recent surge in demand for allotments, in the past few decades allotment numbers have been in decline. The interest in “growing your own” generated by popular TV chefs and organic food campaigns, improved awareness of climate change and the importance of environmental sustainability, increasing food prices and challenges to stereotypes about allotment growers, have all contributed to large waiting lists for allotments in many areas. Nationally, 100,000 people are now estimated to be on waiting lists for allotments. People in some boroughs currently will have to wait for decades to get a plot.

This paper argues that the revival in interest in allotments should be harnessed. We make a series of recommendations on how we can create, promote and protect them. Britain needs a new “Dig for Victory” campaign that recognises the myriad of positive outcomes that allotments can bring, that captures the public mood and which ensures a sustainable approach is adopted.

1 *The benefits of allotments*

Allotments bring a number of benefits to both individual gardeners and the wider community. Over 70% of the population believe that spending time in their gardens is important for their quality of life.¹ Yet many people, such as flat dwellers, are frequently denied a space to garden and grow their own fruit and vegetables. To prevent exclusion from the opportunities that those people with gardens enjoy, allotments are a vital resource.

Allotments provide users with a number of health benefits. By promoting physical exercise they can help prevent and tackle problems such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity. Research suggests that just 30 minutes gardening can burn as many calories as aerobic exercise.² Moreover, allotments promote a more healthy and nutritious diet with readily available and easily accessed fresh and wholesome food. Evidence shows that those who grow their own food are likely to eat more fruit and vegetables.³

As well as improving physical health, there are a number of mental health benefits. The charity 'Thrive' highlights how regular gardening activity has been shown by a recent study to reduce the risk of dementia by 36%.⁴ Recently the Department for Health highlighted how initiatives such as urban allotments for the over 50s could help to prevent and treat mental health problems. The National Director for Mental Health Services stated that poor mental health was thought to cost the UK economy somewhere in the region of £77 billion per year.⁵

¹ National Trust (2009), 'Space to Grow: Why People Need Gardens', http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-chl/w-places_collections/w-gardens/w-gardens-space_to_grow.htm

² National Trust (2009) 'Space to Grow: Why People Need Gardens' http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-chl/w-places_collections/w-gardens/w-gardens-space_to_grow.htm

³ Health Promotion International (2007), 'Growing urban health: Community gardening in South-East Toronto', <http://heapro.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/dam001v1.pdf>

⁴ Thrive (2009), 'Dementia and Gardening', <http://www.thrive.org.uk/dementia-and-gardening.aspx>

⁵ Department of Health (2009), 'New Horizons – Government Consults on Mental Health and Wellbeing', http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/News/Recentstories/DH_103186

Case Study

Croydon Council

In July 2009 Croydon Council launched its new community allotment project which aims to bring together the borough's older and more vulnerable residents to partake in healthy outdoor activity. With funding from the lottery and the Council's community care grant a number of beds have been built, some of which are raised to allow disabled access.

<http://www.croydon.gov.uk/democracy/councilnews/launch>

Research studies have found that gardeners find the opportunity to interact with nature relaxing and calming.⁶ Allotments, particularly in cities, offer a retreat from urban living and escape from a fast paced world. They can help develop life skills, such as deferred gratification and reward for effort, and can provide a sense of achievement, satisfaction, and pride. Moreover, gardening is an empowering experience that can build self-esteem and relieve stress.⁷

The House of Commons Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee – which examines the expenditure, administration and policy of Government in these areas – recently stated that ‘Consumers will need to think more about the impacts of the way their food is produced, and that the Government will have to encourage them to do so. A formidable task, but it will be rendered less formidable if consumers are engaged with the concept of food production in the first place.’⁸ Allotments help achieve this goal by reconnecting people with the food that they eat through actively involving them in the process of food production.

⁶ Health Promotion International (2007), ‘Growing urban health: Community gardening in South-East Toronto’, <http://heapro.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/dam001v1.pdf>

⁷ Health Promotion International (2007), ‘Growing urban health: Community gardening in South-East Toronto’, <http://heapro.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/dam001v1.pdf>

⁸ House of Commons (2009), Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee, ‘Securing Food Supplies up to 2050: The Challenges faced by the UK’, 21 July 2009, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmenvfru/213/213i.pdf>

Case Study

Mansfield District Council

Mansfield District Council provided land for the 'Little Roots Children's Community Allotment Group' to help children get the best start in life. The idea was to establish a community allotment in Mansfield to address issues of social exclusion, physical and mental wellbeing and nutritional knowledge.

http://www.institute.nhs.uk/health_and_social_care_awards/h&asca_synopsis/little_roots_children%E2%80%99s_community_allotment_group.html

There are a wide ranging set of important educative benefits of allotments, particularly for schools or children's groups to visit and learn. Educating children of the importance of healthy food and environmental sustainability is now considered to be an important role of local authorities and schools. Eighty per cent of the population are reported to believe that children should learn growing and gardening at school.⁹ Brighton and Hove City Council have proposed that under the Sustainable Communities Act food growing is introduced as part of the national curriculum, either on or off school sites.¹⁰

Case Study

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council donated £800 to help to pay for allotments and a gardening shed at Broadwater Down Primary School in Showfields. The school wanted to create allotments for the children but has also opened some to the community – 8 families are growing their own food on site. Any produce (including eggs) is turned into healthy lunches for the children and surplus sold to parents. The number of children having school lunches has quadrupled.

<http://www.thisiskent.co.uk/greenwatch/Nature-initiative-Tunbridge-Wells-primary-school/article-866283-detail/article.html>

⁹ National Trust (2009), 'Space to Grow: Why People Need Gardens' http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-chl/w-places_collections/w-gardens/w-gardens-space_to_grow.htm

¹⁰ Brighton and Hove City Council (2009), '2009 Proposals under the Sustainable Communities Act', Brighton and Hove City Council' <http://www.brighton-hove.gov.uk/index.cfm?request=c1209775>

Growing food on allotments allows individuals and communities to reduce their carbon footprint, by reducing the energy used to process and distribute food, and can help tackle climate change. It will also help reduce packaging and the resulting landfill. Each year an estimated 6.3 million tonnes of packaging comes into British homes at a cost of £450 to the average family, with one sixth of the households' annual food budget goes on packaging.¹¹

Allotments provide opportunities for sustainable waste management, such as through re-use, recycling and composting. Moreover, increasing the number of allotment sites will help absorb CO₂ and excess rainfall which will minimise flooding, a problem which, forecasts suggest, will increase with climate change. In Britain we have lost 97% of our fruit and vegetable varieties since 1900 and globally 75% of the genetic diversity of crop plants was lost in the last century.¹² Section 40 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 imposes a duty on local authorities to have regard for the conservation of biodiversity. As green spaces, allotments provide the perfect opportunity for local authorities to fulfil this objective.

Case Study

Islington Council

Islington's Biodiversity Action Plan includes a section referring to gardens and allotments. It aims not only to protect current biodiversity but also to educate gardeners and allotment holders in the importance of wildlife by such initiatives as involving the local press. The full Action Plan can be found at:

<http://www.islington.gov.uk/environment/GettingGreener/NaturalIslington/biodiversityplan.asp>

Allotments facilitate social interaction between individual and family plot holders, and communal gardening allows groups of people to garden plots. Allotments and community gardens promote social wellbeing and develop cohesive communities, as people can learn from the experience of others. They

¹¹ Stacey, C. (2009), 'Food Packaging: Why the Waste?', BBC Food Matters, http://www.bbc.co.uk/food/food_matters/packaging1.shtml

¹² Capital Growth (2009), 'Facts and Figures', http://www.capitalgrowth.org/big_idea/facts_figures/

facilitate the development and strengthening of local social ties and networks, providing a place for socialising and promoting a sense of community.¹³ They indirectly promote inter-generational knowledge transfer, respect and understanding. There is also evidence that they can help recent immigrants with agricultural skills to make the transition into urban economies and maintain their identity by growing specific culturally defined crops.¹⁴

Case Study

Norwich City Council

Norwich City Council runs 'Strong Roots', a therapeutic horticultural project. The project is linked to vulnerable groups such as adults with learning difficulties, asylum seekers and refugees and helps to develop cohesion for these groups in the community.

http://www.norwich.gov.uk/webapps/atoz/service_page.asp?id=1195#initiatives

Allotments and community gardening can also play a role in tackling crime and preventing reoffending. In San Francisco's county jail a small prison garden was set up in a program called the 'Garden Project'. The programme organiser, Catherine Sneed, reports that witnessing the cycle of growth and renewal allows the prisoners and ex-offenders to see their own potential for growth and change.¹⁵ Those who took part in the Garden Project were 25% less likely to return to jail than those who did not.¹⁶

At the UN's 'World Food Security' conference in 2008, the UN announced that, to cope with rising demand, food production would have to increase by 50% by 2030. The Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee's paper, 'Securing Food Supplies up to 2050: The Challenges faced by the

13 Armstrong, D. (2000), 'A Survey of Community Gardens in Upstate New York: Implications for Health Promotion and Community Development', <http://www.cityfarmer.org/CGNewYork.html>

14 Lawson, L. (2005), 'City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America - Introduction', <http://www.ucpress.edu/books/pages/9533/9533.intro.php>

15 Sneed, C. (2000), 'Seeds of Change', Yes! Magazine, 30 Sept 2000, <http://yesmagazine.org/issues/is-it-time-to-close-the-prisons/seeds-of-change> and The Garden Project (2009), 'The Garden project', <http://www.gardenproject.org/thegardenproject.htm>

16 Sneed, C. (2000), 'Seeds of Change', Yes! Magazine, 30 Sept 2000, <http://yesmagazine.org/issues/is-it-time-to-close-the-prisons/seeds-of-change> and The Garden Project (2009), 'The Garden project', <http://www.gardenproject.org/thegardenproject.htm>

UK', considered how the UK should respond. It concluded that production in allotments and gardens would have benefits for the security of food supplies.¹⁷ Following this report, Environment Secretary Hilary Benn has called for a 'radical rethink' on how the UK produces and consumes its food. As a part of this, producers, supermarkets and consumers were invited to suggest how a secure food system should look in 2030.¹⁸ We believe allotments could play an important part in this new future for food; producing readily accessible and easily accessible produce.

Allotments have multiple benefits, some direct and more obvious, others more tangential but no less important. What is clear is that there is a compelling case for them and their expansion, but the story of allotments is one of demand outstripping supply.

¹⁷ House of Commons (2009), Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee, 'Securing Food Supplies up to 2050: The Challenges faced by the UK', 21 July 2009, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmenvfru/213/213i.pdf>

¹⁸ Kinver, M. (2009), 'Radical Rethink Needed on Food', BBC News, 10 August 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/8189549.stm>

2 *Losing the plot*

In the late 1940s there were 1.4 million allotments. Popularity was high due to World War II and the ‘Dig for Victory’ campaign which encouraged people to grow their own food. In the 1980s and 1990s, plots were sold off by councils around the country primarily due to lack of demand. Today an insufficient supply of about 200,000 allotment plots remain¹⁹

In 2006 the London Assembly conducted a survey of allotments in London. Ten years ago there were 769 sites in London whereas in 2006 there were only 737, a net loss of 4.2%. In the 12 months preceding February 2006 there were five applications to the Secretary of State for disposal of sites in London; all were approved. Seven new sites have been established, but all are smaller than the previous ones. There is not just a problem with losses of entire sites, the number of individual plots has also reduced and at a significantly greater rate than the loss of sites.²⁰

This loss of sites and plots now poses a problem as demand for allotments has rocketed. The publicity and interest generated by TV chefs, such as Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, has helped encourage people to want to grow their own vegetables.

The stereotypical view of allotments being the reserve of the working class, like the character of Arthur Fowler in the BBC soap *EastEnders*, is being firmly challenged. The appeal of allotments is widening and a recent survey, by home insurance firm LV, found that single parents are the most likely group to want to rent or apply for an allotment – with one in three saying that they were interested in an allotment.²¹

The urban allotment has been described by commentators as “both a sought-after commodity and an essential social accessory”.²² Harrods recently

¹⁹ LV (2009), ‘Brits Rediscover the Good Life’, Press Release, Liverpool Victoria, 2 June 2009, http://www.lv.com/media_centre/press_releases/brits-discover-good-life

²⁰ London Assembly (2006), ‘A Lot to Lose: London’s Disappearing Allotments’, <http://www.london.gov.uk/assembly/reports/environment/allotments.pdf>

²¹ LV (2009), ‘Brits Rediscover the Good Life’, Press Release, Liverpool Victoria, 2 June 2009, http://www.lv.com/media_centre/press_releases/brits-discover-good-life

²² Miller, A. (2008), ‘Up the Allotments’, *The Telegraph*, 24 May 2008, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/non_fictionreviews/3673629/Up-the-allotments.html

offered a £300 consultation on how to create an allotment and offered a team of experts to come and develop a plot from £1,000.²³ Even the Queen recently turned a part of the garden in Buckingham Palace into a vegetable patch to provide a variety of home grown produce to the palace kitchen.²⁴

The economic downturn, rather than suppressing demand, has fuelled demand, leading one academic to claim that the outlook for allotments has rarely looked so promising.²⁵ The rising costs of living and increased food prices have led to a new call for allotments as people look at ways to save on household costs. A recent survey showed that allotment owners saved around £950 a year by growing their own produce.²⁶

The number of those interested in the idea of an allotment is thought to be approximately 6 million, illustrating the potential scale of demand.²⁷ This demand is only expected to grow in the coming years as a result of social and environmental pressures. According to a report from the Department of Communities and Local Government, 'The need for allotments, community gardens and urban farms is likely to rise with the growth of interest in organic farming and as a result of rising housing densities and the consequential reduction in the size of many gardens.'²⁸

The increasing mismatch between supply and demand for allotments is demonstrated by the rapid increase in waiting lists over the past decade. In 1996 waiting lists totalled around 13,000 but by 2008 the total was estimated to be around 100,000.²⁹ Waiting lists in one London borough are estimated to be as long as 40 years.³⁰ Waiting lists in some areas have grown

23 Osborne, H. (2007), 'Harrods Unveils Rooftop Allotments' *The Guardian*, 17 April 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2007/apr/17/homesandgardens.lifeandhealth>

24 Davies, C. (2009), 'Queen turns corner of palace back yard into an allotment', *The Observer*, 14 June 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/jun/14/queen-allotment-organic-gardening>

25 Wiltshire, R, 'Growing in the Community: The Longer View', Kings College London <http://www.sags.org.uk/docs/ReportsPresentations/richardwiltshire.pdf>

26 LV (2009), 'Brits Rediscover the Good Life', Press Release, Liverpool Victoria, 2 June 2009, http://www.lv.com/media_centre/press_releases/brits-discover-good-life

27 LV (2009), 'Brits Rediscover the Good Life', Press Release, Liverpool Victoria, 2 June 2009, http://www.lv.com/media_centre/press_releases/brits-discover-good-life

28 DCLG (2002), 'Assessing needs and opportunities: a companion guide to PPG17.'

29 NSLAG (2009), Survey Data from 'A Survey of Allotment Waiting Lists in England', Transition Town West Kirby and National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners, http://www.nsalg.org.uk/uploads/article564/ttwk_nsalg_survey_09.pdf

30 LV (2009), 'Brits Rediscover the Good Life', Press Release, Liverpool Victoria, 2 June 2009, http://www.lv.com/media_centre/press_releases/brits-discover-good-life

so long that the local authorities have closed them – leading to a systematic under-assessment of the true demand.³¹

In some areas the prices of allotments have increased rapidly, and there are fears that some people are being “priced out” of allotments. There was anger from plot holders in 2008 when one council demanded a 500% rise in yearly rates when it decided to halt allotment subsidies for the 2008/9 budget. One plot holder paid £27 for his plot the previous year, but was facing a price rise of £143 and complained to the local paper that his hobby was now too expensive so he would have to give it up.³²

Many local authorities find that allotments are a drain on the budget and often run at a loss. For example, in one area the average charge for allotments is £35 a year, which means that the allotments currently run at a loss of £7,000 to the Borough. For the Council to recover all expenditure, allotment rents would need to be increased by 330%, which would mean that the average rent would increase to £150.³³

31 Local Government Association (2008), ‘Growing in the community.’

32 Lloyd, M. (2008), ‘Anger at Rise in Cannock Allotment Rents’, Cannock Chase Post, 25 Sept 2008, <http://www.chasepost.net/news-in-cannock/cannock-burntwood-news/cannock-news/2008/09/25/anger-at-rise-in-cannock-allotment-rents-93633-21902604/>

33 Scarborough Borough council (2008), ‘Provision of Allotments Within Scarborough’, Corporate Strategy Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 19 Nov 2008, [http://democracy.scarborough.gov.uk/\(S\(hjuoqljeiobyes55y0apjf3b\)\)/Published/C00000111/M00001918/AI00005955/\\$HFAM0870ALLOTMENTS.DOCA.ps.pdf](http://democracy.scarborough.gov.uk/(S(hjuoqljeiobyes55y0apjf3b))/Published/C00000111/M00001918/AI00005955/$HFAM0870ALLOTMENTS.DOCA.ps.pdf)

3 *The way forward*

In order to increase supply in areas of high demand, more innovative approaches need to be adopted. As the supply of land is finite, these approaches largely involve converting under-utilised land into more productive allotments – offering both social and environmental benefits. While vacant land is an obvious starting point for this strategy, we believe that radical approaches including utilising waterways, developing urban rooftop gardens, and opening access to the holdings of the country’s top landowners, should be adopted.

Innovative approaches to utilising vacant space

Vancouver set the goal of creating 2,010 new growing spaces by the start of the winter Olympics in 2010 and London Mayor Boris Johnson has announced his aim to see 2,012 new growing plots created in the Capital to feed the athletes for the 2012 Olympics. This ‘Capital Growth’ project will see new sites on spare pieces of land, such as on banks of reservoirs and disused railway yards.³⁴ Thirteen organisations – including councils, schools, hospitals, housing estates, and companies – have pledged to make land available for community gardening schemes and both the National Trust and the Royal Parks have agreed to provide allotment space.³⁵

British Waterways has announced that stretches of unused waterway will be made available so that plots can be created on retired work boats to create floating gardens or on unused surrounding land.³⁶ The first will be a stretch of land along the Hertford Union Canal in Hackney Wick.³⁷ We welcome this approach and recommend that this innovation should be promoted in all areas around the country.

³⁴ Mulholland, H (2008), ‘Boris Johnson unveils plans to create 2012 new vegetable gardens in London’, *The Guardian*, 4 November 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/nov/04/boris-london>

³⁵ Vidal, J. (2009), ‘City of London plans guerrilla allotments for vacant building sites’, *The Guardian*, 16 June 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/jun/16/city-london-allotment-food>

³⁶ Gray, L. (2009) ‘Allotments on canals to be offered to the public’, *The Telegraph*, 20 Feb 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/4736389/Allotments-on-canals-to-be-offered-to-public.html>

³⁷ Waterscape (2009) ‘BW teams up with Boris Johnson to go green’, *Waterscape.com*, 19 Feb 2009, <http://www.waterscape.com/features-and-articles/news/2370/bw-teams-up-with-boris-johnson-to-go-green>

Brownfield land – areas that have been previously developed but are currently unused – also offers great potential for allotments. Calculations suggest that Britain has 12,710 hectares of vacant brownfield land that is unused or may be available for redevelopment. This land can be developed “as is,” without levelling, demolition or clearing of fixed structures or foundations.³⁸

The vast majority (85%) of this vacant land is located in urban areas or within 500 metres of a built-up area – precisely where allotments are in highest demand. About one-third of this land has been deemed suitable for housing, but only a fraction has been allocated for housing development. Of this unused suitable land, 28% has yet to be allocated for any specific use.³⁹ This unused, uncontaminated, and unallocated urban land represents a significant opportunity for allotments.

In 2007 Middlesbrough Council, Middlesbrough Primary Care Trust, Groundwork South Tees, Sure Start, Stand Together East Middlesbrough (STEM), and BioRegional Quintain Estates and Development PLC, formed the Urban Garden Project, which turned some of the ‘dead’ land in the area, such as roundabouts, into places to grow food.⁴⁰ The City of London has only 22 acres of open space, mostly in old burial grounds and small squares, but the recession has left many building sites vacant and so the council is identifying areas that will be vacant for between 18 months and two years to set up temporary allotment sites.⁴¹

We recommend that vacant land is far better utilised by councils and recommend a large increase in the number of temporary allotments on these sites. We are conscious that some local authorities have also debated the virtues of using some of their park and purely ornamental spaces for allotment purposes. Although we recognise the sensitivities around these issues, we would encourage local authorities to engage local residents in discussion about how they might like to see different parts of their park space used. “Guerrilla Gardeners” are already growing plants and crops in areas,

³⁸ DCLG. (2008), ‘Previously-developed land that may be available for development: England 2007.’

³⁹ DCLG. (2008), ‘Previously-developed land that may be available for development: England 2007.’

⁴⁰ One North East (2007), ‘Middlesbrough sows the seeds of urban farming’, News Article, 23 May 2007, <http://www.onenortheast.gov.uk/page/news/article.cfm?mode=search&articleId=2285>

⁴¹ Vidal, J. (2009), ‘City of London plans guerrilla allotments for vacant building sites’, The Guardian, 16 June 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/jun/16/city-london-allotment-food>

often illegally, and councils should lead the way in harnessing this enthusiasm and directing it to safe areas that have a wider positive community impact.

Existing buildings and new developments should also be utilised for allotments. It is estimated that flat roofs in London comprise an area 24 times the size of Richmond Park.⁴² “Edible landscaping” should be considered so that roofs are built that are strong enough to support greenhouses and rooftop gardens and so that allotment space is located to gain the maximum amount of sunlight and better ensure soil is fertile.⁴³ Some housing developers have already included roof top allotments, for example Crest Nicholson has included rooftop allotments on a current development in Brighton.⁴⁴ Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 3 (housing) states that local planning authorities should have clear policies for the protection and creation of open space and biodiversity. Furthermore it emphasises that new housing developments should incorporate sufficient provision of green spaces, which includes allotments.⁴⁵ We recommend that “edible landscaping” design should be actively encouraged by councils and large scale urban developments should be forced to allocate land for allotments.

We also recommend local authorities encourage community gardening to a far greater extent. Not only does communal gardening improve opportunities for greater social interaction and cohesion, it would cut waiting lists as more people can garden on merged plots than if the same area was divided into individual plots. This option is rarely offered to residents and the idea may be more popular than many might assume. A recent study followed a group of 20 participants over the age of 65 who were given a choice of gardening individually or communally and the majority chose the latter option, preferring the greater opportunity for social interaction and possibility of help from others.⁴⁶

⁴² Norwood, G. (2009), 'Allotments: A Patch of Your Own', The Independent, 18 Feb 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/house-and-home/property/allotments-a-patch-of-your-own-1624580.html>

⁴³ Bone, V. (2008), 'Putting down roots in the city', BBC News, 18 Feb 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7482670.stm>

⁴⁴ Norwood, G. (2009), 'Allotments: A Patch of Your Own', The Independent, 18 Feb 2009, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/house-and-home/property/allotments-a-patch-of-your-own-1624580.html>

⁴⁵ LGA (2008), 'Growing in the Community', 2nd Edition

⁴⁶ Milligan, C. Gatrell, A. and Bingley, A. (2004), 'Cultivating Health: Therapeutic Landscapes and Older People in Northern England', *Social Science and Medicine*, 58, 2004 pp 1781-1793

Top landowners and temporary leasing

We believe that is unfair that while some individuals own hundreds of thousands of acres, others are unable to rent a small allotment plot. Land is highly concentrated in the hands of a relatively small group of top landowners: the top 1% of landholders own 70% of land in the UK.⁴⁷ Across the UK, research indicates that the biggest individual landowner is the Duke of Buccleuch & Queensbury with 207,700 acres, the Duke of Northumberland is estimated to have 130,200 acres and the Duke of Westminster 129,300 acres.⁴⁸ The Royal Family, comprising the Crown Estates, the Duchies of Cornwall and Lancaster, and private land, has some 677,000 acres.⁴⁹

This concentration of land ownership is substantial in the areas of the country with the highest unmet allotment demand, indicating a promising avenue for increasing allotment supply. Hampshire, Cheshire, and Kent are three of the counties with the longest allotment waiting lists for which data is available.⁵⁰ In Hampshire and Kent, more than 30% of the land is held by 0.02% of the county population. In Cheshire, the figures are lower but still striking, with 8.3% of the land held by 0.01% of the population. Meanwhile large chunks of the population in all three counties own no land at all – as much as 72.8% of the population in Kent.

County	# People Waiting for Allotments ⁵²	Acreage owned by landowners with > 500 acres ⁵³	% Acreage owned by landowners with > 500 acres	Landowners with > 500 acres as a % of total population	% Population owning no land
Hampshire	5210	331,946	35.5	0.02	45.4
Cheshire	3549	48,214	8.3	0.01	46
Kent	2477	287,532	31	0.02	72.8

⁴⁷ Cahill, K. (2001), *Who owns Britain*, London: Canongate Books

⁴⁸ Cahill, K. (2001), *Who owns Britain*, London: Canongate Books

⁴⁹ Cahill, K. (2001), *Who owns Britain*, London: Canongate Books

⁵⁰ Hampshire has the third, Cheshire the fifth and Kent the ninth longest allotment waiting lists in the country, according to data from the NSALG. Others at the top of the list include Greater London, Tyne and Wear, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Greater Manchester, and East Sussex. Data for large landholdings in these counties were not available. For Hampshire, Cheshire, and Kent, our data likely underestimate the actual waiting lists, as there is missing data for councils in these counties. In Hampshire, 11 out of 13 councils reported data; in Cheshire, 7 out of 8 councils reported data; and in Kent, 9 out of 13 councils reported data.

⁵¹ Data from NSALG.

⁵² Data from Cahill, K. (2001), *Who owns Britain*, London: Canongate Books.

In these counties, large swaths of land are held by an elite group of wealthy aristocratic landowners. In Hampshire for example, the 8th Duke of Wellington owns 7,000 acres, and the 6th Earl of Normanton owns 6,000 acres. In Cheshire, the 6th Duke of Westminster owns 15,000 acres, while the 3rd Viscount of Leverhulme owns another 10,000. In Kent, the 8th Marquess of Conyngham owns 5,000 acres, while institutional landowners like the Church of England and the Crown Estate each hold more than 10,000 acres.⁵³

The full picture of landholdings in the UK, however, is yet unknown as 30% of the country's land is unregistered.⁵⁴ This unregistered land is believed to be concentrated in the holdings of major landholders.⁵⁵ Nearly half of the stock of vacant brownfield land is privately owned and the ownership of an additional 19% is unknown and likely to be private.⁵⁶ The Land Registry aims to complete their records in the coming years so that 100% of British land is registered by 2012.⁵⁷

We recommend that once this registration process has finished in 2012 the Department for Communities considers how small pockets of under-utilised land, in the ownership of the top 1% of land owners, might be brought into community use. Not all of the large landholdings will be suitable for allotments, either because of where it is located or the nature of its usage. In particular, much of the land held by large institutional landowners such as the Forestry Commission, the Ministry of Defence, and the utility companies may be considered inappropriate. However, much of the individual holdings, as well as those held by the Church of England and the Crown Estate, are likely to have areas that may be suitable for allotments.

When the current Government established a 'right to roam' in the 1990s there was much concern that landowner interests would be jeopardised – an anxiety that proved baseless. Today, there are powerful arguments to say that a small proportion of the holdings of the wealthiest landowners could be

53 Cahill, Kevin (2001), *Who owns Britain*, London: Canongate Books. Note that the land data for the 8th Marquess of Conyngham in Kent is based the land ownership of his father the 7th Marquess of Conyngham, who he succeeded in 2009.

54 Land Registry (2009). '2008-09 Annual report'.

55 Cahill, Kevin (2001), *Who owns Britain*, London: Canongate Books.'

56 DCLG. (2008), 'Previously-developed land that may be available for development: England 2007.'

57 Land Registry (2009), Land Registry and its achievements, <http://www1.landregistry.gov.uk/ar2005/achievements/myths/>

made available for local residents on a medium term basis, perhaps for 10 year community leasehold periods.

We would hope that these large landowners could find a voluntary way of making land available, especially small potential allotments within areas with long waiting lists. The 'Landshare' website, for example, allows landowners to offer land for people to grow their own food and aspiring growers to register their interest for a plot, so that supply and demand can be matched.⁵⁸ Over 40,000 people have signed up to the 'Landshare' project so far, with over 3,500 growers and 1,000 landowners posting a listing.⁵⁹

To encourage a socially responsible approach from landowners we recommend that HM Treasury offers tax incentives to partly compensate for any loss of potential earnings from this land, such as through tax credits. However, we also believe that the Government should reserve the option of establishing a Large Private Estates Commission to map the private land of individual land owners in areas of high community need. Local authorities would then be able to assess the suitability of this mapped land for, amongst other things, allotment and community garden sites. Where appropriate, these local authorities, supported by the Large Private Estate Commission, should be empowered through statutory legislation to temporarily transfer plots of that land on the basis of a medium term lease for community usage. If necessary the Commission ensure that any landowner grievances are fairly considered and make a judgement about potential reimbursement for community use.

There appears to be support for the power to transfer plots of land from landowners to the community for allotments on a temporary basis. Sheffield City Council recently requested that the government gives them a "rebuttable right" to enter into temporary leases compulsorily with owners of vacant brownfield land, which they could then sublease to community groups.⁶⁰

We recommend that in addition to encouraging the conversion of privately held land into allotments, councils should also play a more direct role in increasing supply. Across England, 50 counties and unitary authorities owned

⁵⁸ <http://landshare.channel4.com/>

⁵⁹ <http://landshare.channel4.com/listings/within/49.922935,-12.150879/57.704147,7.624512>

⁶⁰ LGA (2009), Lead Authority: Sheffield City Council, <http://new.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=2742348>

and managed 96,206 hectares of agricultural land in 2006. This land is let to 2836 tenants.⁶¹ Council agricultural land holdings have decreased by 30% since 1984. To cope with ongoing budget pressures, many councils are now attempting to speed up the process of disposing of this farmland.⁶² We encourage councils to consider converting some of this agricultural land into allotment spaces instead of selling it off. This conversion can be done automatically under Section 336 of the Town and Country Planning Act of 1990.⁶³

Improving Legislation

Several Acts of Parliament predating 1950 make up the main legislative context for allotment planning, provision and protection. Understanding this complex legislation can be a challenge for local authorities and some are unaware of these existing powers.⁶⁴ Recently, when seeking planning permission for a new allotment site, one local authority did not realise until further investigation that planning permission was not required for allotments on land which had previously been used for agricultural purposes.

In 1998 the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs conducted a major review of allotments and concluded that 'the Government should issue a Green Paper as soon as is practicable and commission a research study to consult with the various interested parties and develop a consolidating piece of legislation which simplifies, updates and enhances existing allotments legislation. The Government should aim to introduce the resulting Bill within the lifetime of this Parliament.'⁶⁵ Over a decade on, no such action has been taken and we recommend that the Government takes these steps at the earliest opportunity.

⁶¹ DEFRA (2008), 'The importance of the county farms service to the rural economy', by Sir Donald Curry, Chair of the Sustainable Farming and Food Delivery Group.

⁶² 'The importance of the county farms service to the rural economy.' Sir Donald Curry, CBE FRAGS. 2008.

⁶³ <http://www.nsalg.org.uk/uploads/article547/Allotments%20-%20The%20Basics.pdf>

⁶⁴ All of the Acts relating to allotments up until 1950 can be found in House of Commons (1998), Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, Fifth Report, 24 June 1998, 'Appendix II: Modern Allotment Legislation', available at <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmenvtra/560/56016.htm>.

⁶⁵ House of Commons (1998), Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, Fifth Report, 24 June 1998, 'Conclusions and Recommendations', <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmenvtra/560/56014.htm>

A number of councils have recently called for revision of allotment legislation under the Sustainable Communities Act. Birmingham City Council has recently asked for changes to allotment legislation to encourage and facilitate local authorities to provide more allotments and community gardens. They have suggested supporting the city's economy by renting local authority owned land to small businesses so that they can set up market gardens.⁶⁶ Brighton and Hove City Council have also made a request for legislative changes to encourage allotments by allowing plot holders to sell their surplus produce.⁶⁷ We strongly support these proposals and encourage the Government to allow local growers to sell their produce to local restaurants and through local shops and farmers' markets. Lambeth Council, as part of its Economic Recovery Implementation Plan, is already exploring the idea of piloting a 'Fruit and Vegetable Co-operative' that will provide access to fresh fruit and vegetables for a deprived community where availability of such produce is limited.⁶⁸

Bee friendly

There are increasing fears that the honey bee may disappear if the population continues to decline at current rates, as they have no natural defence against many viruses. A large reduction in bee numbers would be costly as pollination by bees is estimated to contribute £165m annually to the agricultural economy.⁶⁹ Locally kept bees also have the benefit of producing honey without the need for costly and polluting transport and refining. Honey is regarded by many as a healthier option than refined sugar and can be used as a sugar substitute in cooking, including jam-making and brewing.⁷⁰ Beekeeping would also aid local authorities' biodiversity objectives.

⁶⁶ Birmingham City Council (2009), 'The Sustainable Communities Act', http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/Media/Proposals.pdf?MEDIA_ID=292879&FILENAME=Proposals.pdf

⁶⁷ LGA (2009), Lead Authority: Brighton & Hove City Council, <http://new.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=3076437>

⁶⁸ Lambeth Council, (2009), 'Cabinet, 8 June 2009: Lambeth's Economic Recovery Implementation Plan', http://www.lambeth.gov.uk/moderngov/Published/C00000225/M00006698/A100007876/S05aLambethEconomicRecoveryImplementationPlan_v1.docA.ps.pdf

⁶⁹ Davis, I. (2008) 'Ten things to do to help honeybees', The Guardian, 13 May 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/may/13/wildlife.endangered/species>

⁷⁰ Low Impact Initiative (2009), 'Beekeeping', http://www.lowimpact.org/factsheet_beekeeping.htm

It is important that Government encourages and promotes beekeeping on allotments and offer incentives to do so. A beginner's kit and a nucleus of bees will cost between £350 and £600.⁷¹ Government could offer grants for people to get started in beekeeping. The low carbon building programme allows households to apply for grants of up to £2,500 to install 'green' energy solutions such as wind turbines or solar panels. The full grant allows 10% off the most expensive installation.⁷² We recommend that the same policy principles are applied to the keeping of honey bees, which would mean grants of up to £60 be given to provide an incentive.⁷³

Beekeeping can cause complaints and problems and, rather than banning bees from allotments altogether, we would encourage councils to issue guidelines for beekeeping on allotment sites. For example, following consultation with the allotment community and local beekeepers, Harlow Council has set out a series of conditions relating to:⁷⁴

- Beekeeping registration
- Right of inspection
- Insurance requirements
- Competency and management standards
- Location of hives
- Number of hives per acre
- Spraying and pesticides
- Co-operation with DEFRA Officials
- Identification marks and owner contact details for hives
- Onsite information of emergency contacts

71 Thorne (2009), 'Thorne Beginners Kits', <http://www.thorne.co.uk/thorne7.htm>

72 Low Carbon Buildings (2009), 'Low Carbon Buildings Programme', Department of Energy and Climate Change, <http://www.lowcarbonbuildings.org.uk/about/>

73 The British Bee Keepers Association (2009), 'New Beekeepers', http://www.britishbee.org.uk/new_beekeepers.php

74 Harlow Council (2009), 'Guidelines for keeping bees on allotments', <http://www.harlow.gov.uk/pdf/Guidelines%20for%20Keeping%20Bees%20on%20Allotments%20Appendix%204.pdf>

Learning from best practice

For many people the cost of allotments can be prohibitively expensive. We recommend that councils offer discounted rates to their citizens with lower incomes. For example, Bristol City Council offers 50% and 25% concessions to a number of groups, such as those receiving Income Support or pensions credit and full time students.⁷⁵

People do not live and travel exclusively within local authority boundaries and we recommend a collaborative approach from local authorities to allow those willing to travel access to plots in neighbouring council boroughs if supply exceeds demand in their area. This idea has already been adopted by some London Boroughs, such as Camden which encourages its residents to apply for plots in neighbouring boroughs such as Barnet, where plots are more readily available.⁷⁶

The wider benefits and potential of allotments is rarely fully understood and the impact they have on wider social objectives is too often not reflected in sufficient commitment from partners across a locality. Such benefits could be felt by combining services and pooling budgets across departments and agencies to a greater extent. For example, Bristol City Council has combined their allotment services with waste. In the autumn, the council offers leaves to the allotments with vehicular access for the purpose of compost rather than taking them to landfill, benefiting both the allotment tenants and the Council.⁷⁷ Allotments help many agencies and organisations meet their objectives, whether it is the Primary Care Trusts delivering better health outcomes or the Environment Agency achieving its biodiversity priorities. Greater cross-agency buy-in to the allotment agenda in many localities must be secured.

Creation of an effective local allotment strategy can play an important part in ensuring the planning, promotion and protection of allotments both now and in

75 Bristol City Council (2009), 'Getting an allotment: Costs, discounts and concessions', <http://www.bristol.gov.uk/ccm/content/Environment-Planning/Parks-and-open-spaces/allotments/getting-an-allotment.en?page=2>

76 Camden Council (2009), 'A guide to allotments in Camden' <https://camden.gov.uk/ccm/content/leisure/outdoor-camden/allotments/allotments.en?page=2>

77 Bristol City Council (2009), 'On Your Allotment', <http://www.bristol.gov.uk/ccm/content/Environment-Planning/Parks-and-open-spaces/allotments/on-your-allotment.en;jsessionid=581C44666E84BC8205806B96EBCF15C5.tcwwwaplaws3>

the future. The Local Government Association provides a useful outline of how councils can best to devise a strategy in detail in its publication, 'Growing in the Community'.⁷⁸ As an example, a summary of the aims and action plan of Wirral Council's Allotment Strategy 2007-2012 is provided in Appendix 1.⁷⁹

Power to the people

The Small Holdings and Allotments Act of 1908 which states that local authorities must take into consideration 'a representation in writing by any six registered parliamentary electors or rate payers' when assessing demand of allotments. We recommend that councils highlight this section of the law and encourage public petitions from their citizens. Following a petition submission to Tollerton Parish Council Nottingham County Council agreed to lease some land for new allotments.⁸⁰ Aspiring allotment growers of a locality unite! You have nothing to lose except years on a waiting list!

We recommend that if the council's overview and scrutiny committee decides the response is not adequate or substantive, petitioners should be able to secure a debate of the full council.

78 LGA, (2008) 'Growing in the Community', 2nd Edition

79 Wirral Council (2009), Allotment Strategy 2007 – 2012, http://www.wirral.gov.uk/LGCL/100006/200073/510/Wirral_Allotment_Strategy.pdf

80 Holden, T. (2009), 'Villagers get allotments in time for summer', This is Nottingham, 4th May 2009, <http://www.thisisnottingham.co.uk/news/Villagers-allotments-time-summer/article-957342-detail/article.html>

Conclusions

This report has highlighted many of the positive outcomes that allotments generate for both individuals and communities. It has described the growing demand of people wanting to “grow their own” and outlined the increasing waiting lists for allotments. As a society we cannot afford to waste the opportunities that this revival of interest presents. Urgent action is required. We have made a series of recommendations, which we believe would help to help create, promote and protect allotments. To increase supply, we advocate:

- More innovative approaches to better utilise space to grow food, such as banks of rivers, retired boats on waterways and roundabouts.
- Greater engagement with local residents to discuss how they might like to see different parts of their park space utilised.
- Councils should encourage and facilitate the use of vacant building sites for temporary allotments, while the recession puts building programme on hold.
- Local authorities should actively encourage “Edible landscaping”; the creation of roof gardens, and large scale urban developments should be forced to allocate land for allotments.
- Community gardening should be encouraged more by local authorities in order to cut waiting lists and bring greater social and community benefits.

All of these steps would cut allotment waiting lists in areas of high demand, but we believe that society should look to those individuals and institutions who own huge amounts of land to play their part. It is unfair that while some individuals own hundreds of thousands of acres others are unable to rent a small allotment plot, so we propose that:

- The largest landowners in Britain are encouraged to make land available in areas with high demand for allotments and HM Treasury should incentivise this social responsibility by offering tax credits to partly compensate for any loss of potential earnings from the land.

- The Government should reserve the option of establishing a Large Private Estates Commission to map the private land of these individual land owners in areas of high community need. Local authorities could then assess the suitability of this mapped land for allotments and community garden sites. Where appropriate, these local authorities, supported by the Large Private Estate Commission, should be empowered through statutory legislation to temporarily transfer plots of that land on the basis of a medium term lease for community usage.
- Counties and unitary authorities should consider converting any appropriate agricultural land that they own to allotments.

We have also made recommendations to improve allotment legislation:

- In line with the recommendation made in 1998 by the Select Committee, the Government should issue a Green Paper as soon as is practicable and commission a research study to consult with the various interested parties to develop a consolidating piece of legislation which simplifies, updates and enhances existing allotments legislation.
- Legislation should be revised to allow local growers to sell their produce to local restaurants and through local shops and farmers' markets.

We are concerned about the decline in bee numbers and believe that allotments could be better utilised to support bee populations.

- Therefore we recommend that Government should provide grants to help people meet the start-up costs of beekeeping.

There are examples of best practice regarding allotments from local authorities across the country and this report could not hope to capture them all. Nonetheless there are a number of lessons that we believe should be shared and recommend that councils:

- Offer discounted allotment rates to citizens with lower incomes.
- Adopt a collaborative approach so that people who can travel have access to plots in neighbouring council boroughs if supply exceeds demand in their area.

- Combine services and pool budgets across departments to a far greater extent to support allotments and deliver more effectively on a wide range of objectives.
- Produce an allotment strategy to support the planning, promotion and protection of allotments, both now and in the future.

We also believe that local residents should be empowered to demand action from their council, therefore we recommend that:

- Councils encourage public petitions from their citizens on allotments.
- If the council's overview and scrutiny committee decides the response to a petition is not adequate or substantive, petitioners should be able to secure a debate of the full council.

A bold new approach is needed to allow people to grow their own food and promote a sustainable allotment renaissance. Allotments can improve people's quality of life, prevent exclusion, increase physical exercise, encourage a nutritious diet, support mental health, help people relax, teach new life skills, empower people, give individuals self-esteem, reconnect people with the food they eat, educate citizens about healthy food and environmental stability, tackle CO₂ emissions, reduce packaging, support more sustainable waste management, conserve biodiversity, facilitate social interaction, build cohesive communities, strengthen social ties and networks, reduce crime and secure our food supplies. A new "Dig for Victory" would be a dig for scores, if not hundreds, of victories across a range of policy areas.

Appendix 1 Wirral Council's Allotment Strategy 2007-2012

Action	Responsibility		Target Date
Aim 1 To maintain and improve the infrastructure, facilities and quality of allotment sites, ensuring sites are welcoming and accessible to all.			
1.1	Agree a quality standard for all sites	Allotments Officer & Partners	2008
1.2	Carry out a site survey for each allotment site	Allotments Officer	2009
1.3	Investigate potential funding sources	Allotments Officer & Partners	2008
1.4	Produce an improvement plan for each site	Allotments Officer & Partners	2010
1.5	Carry out a survey to establish the type and cost of required toilet provision	Allotments Officer & Partners	2009
1.6	Review programmed grounds maintenance	Allotments Officer	2007

Aim 2 To have safe and secure allotment sites.			
2.1	Carry out security audits	Senior Parks Development Officer	2009
2.2	Investigate the possibility of setting up an Allotment Watch scheme with partners	Allotments Officer & Partners	2008
2.3	Improve the analysis of crime data	Allotments Officer	2008
2.4	Set up system for annual site safety inspections	Allotments Officer & Site Secretaries	2007

Aim 3 To continue to implement an effective management and administration process.			
3.1	Review all administration and management procedures	Senior Parks Development Officer	2007
3.2	Review and finalise amended tenancy documentation	Senior Parks Development Officer	2007
3.3	Confirm the legal status of allotment sites	Allotments Officer	2007

Aim 4 To improve customer satisfaction and increase tenant participation in the management of sites.			
4.1	Improve the allotment information on Wirral Council's web site	Senior Parks Development Officer	2008
4.2	Introduce an exit survey	Senior Parks Development Officer	2007

Aim 5 To promote allotments as a benefit for the whole community, realising the opportunity they offer for education and lifelong learning and to increase social inclusion initiatives.			
5.1	Review and update leaflets and posters	Senior Parks Development Officer	2007
5.2	Review notice boards and on site information	Allotments Officer	2008
5.3	Investigate the production of a guide for new tenants with partners	Allotments Officer & Partners	2008

Aim 6 To highlight the role that allotments play in developing a more sustainable environment, encouraging biodiversity and conservation.			
6.1	Review the problems caused by non-recyclable material generated on sites and the provision of skips	Allotments Officer	2009

Aim 7 To develop a health agenda for allotments, focusing on the benefits, in terms of improving health in the borough.			
7.1	Investigate the Green Gym and any similar initiatives with partners	Allotments Officer & Partners	2008
7.2	Establish links with the Wirral Primary Care Trust	Allotments Officer	2007

Aim 8 To review the existing provision of allotments in Wirral and if necessary to identify areas of potential future allotment provision.			
8.1	Review current allotment provision and identify any future need with a view to addressing and reducing the waiting list	Allotments Officer	2008
8.2	Review the use of unusable areas on allotment sites with a view to addressing and reducing the waiting list	Allotments Officer	2008
Annual review of Allotment Strategy		Allotment Officer & Partners	Annually



Allotments have played an important part in British history, particularly in the “Dig for Victory” campaign in World War II which saw people grow their own produce to boost their food supply. However, despite a recent surge in demand for allotments, in the past few decades allotment numbers have been in decline.

This paper argues that the revival in interest in allotments should be harnessed. We make a series of recommendations on how we can create, promote and protect them. Britain needs a new “Dig for Victory” campaign that recognises the myriad of positive outcomes that allotments can bring, that captures the public mood and which ensures a sustainable approach is adopted.