

Allotment Survey 2015

Aims of the survey

There were several aims in undertaking this survey of allotment holders:

- To gain feedback from plot-holders about the Council's allotment service
- To gain feedback on specific topics such as self-management of sites
- To inform the revision of the allotment strategy which is being written in 2015, in terms of identifying key focus areas and investment priorities
- To understand plot-holder priorities and requirements
- To identify any site specific issues / problems
- To ascertain additional useful information, such as how long people spend on their plot and how many people benefit from the allotment

Methodology

An online survey was drawn up by the allotment officer, with input from site wardens and the Cabinet Member. In February 2015, a link to the online survey was sent to all allotment holders for whom the allotment administration held an e-mail address.

In the case that the e-mail 'bounced' back or the Council did not hold an e-mail address, paper copies of the survey were delivered to the allotment plot or hand-delivered by the warden or posted by the allotment officer (if there was no shed or greenhouse in which to leave the paper copy).

In addition, notices were put up informing plot-holders of the survey and giving the online address and also asking people to contact the office for either a paper copy or on-line link, according to their preference.

The online survey was available until the end of June and was taken off-line on 1st July. One paper copy survey was received after 1st July and was included.

Response

There were 247 responses, of which 210 were online and 37 were hand-written. This represents one third of allotment holders (741 people holding 800 plots).¹

All sites were represented with the breakdown as follows (number of plot-holders at the site in brackets).

Alma Road (77)	16	Midwinter (178)	40
Asquith Road (185)	70	Reddings Road (40)	24
Hatherley Road (31)	13	Severn Road (9)	4
Hayden Road (75)	37	Terry Ashdown (35)	9
Hayden Two (76)	20	Warden Hill (35)	14

¹ Tenants may take on an additional half plot once first half plot is fully cultivated and historically some tenants and community groups were able to have more than one allotment when demand was very low.

Results of the Survey

Q. The size of my allotment is: small medium large extra-large I'm not sure

Small	39	Extra large	5
Medium	119	I'm not sure	14
Large	64	Left blank	7

This means that all plot sizes are represented (broadly in proportion to the number of plots in the range of sizes that the Council offers). Most allotment tenants have a medium (or half-sized) allotment, being between 100 and 199 square metres in size.

Q. During the main growing season I spend the following time each week on my plot: Under 2 hrs 2-5 hrs 5-10 hrs 10-20 hrs over 20 hrs

Under 2 hrs	4	10-20 hrs	68
2-5 hrs	60	Over 20 hrs	19
5-10 hrs	86	Left blank	10

This provides some very useful information for new and potential plot-holders.

One of the problems of the last several years has been people taking on allotments with unrealistic expectations, usually gained from television programmes. The time commitment is often much greater than anticipated and people quickly fall behind, to the detriment of both the plot and plot-holder morale.

To counter this, a leaflet was prepared giving more detail on the time commitment and requirements of allotment gardening. A list of questions was prepared that site wardens and representatives could use when showing people the vacant allotments to help them decide if they had the available time to manage a plot.

This feedback will enhance the available information for potential plot-holders.

Not surprisingly, there is a correlation between size of plot and the time spent on it.

Whereas 38% of plot-holders with a small plot said that they spent under 5 hours on the plot, only 8% of large plot-holders said the same. Only 18% of plot-holders with a small plot spent over 10 hours per week on the plot, whereas for large plot-holders, it was 63%.

For medium-sized plot-holders, there is quite an even spread. 29% are managing their allotment with 2-5 hours spent on the plot per week, 36% spent 5-10 hours and 29% spent 10-20 hours.

The time commitment required is evident. Overall, 70% of those who responded said that they spent over 5 hours a week on their plot in the main growing season.

Finding a minimum of 5 free hours when the weather is conducive, consistently throughout the growing season, could be quite a challenge and it is helpful to have this information to share with potential plot-holders so they can make informed decisions about plot tenancy.

Q. The things I enjoy most about having an allotment are:

'Able to grow organic crops for the family. Company of like- minded people - it is quite a community at the allotment, sharing cultivation tips, swapping a glut of one crop for something else. Enjoying the fresh air and exercise. Escaping to a different world of peace and calm.'

Most people listed several aspects of allotment gardening in response to this question. We analysed the first 100 responses to get a better picture of why people have allotments and in what way it contributes to their sense of well-being. We allocated each separate comment to one of the following categories.

Analysis of first 100 responses:

Category of Comment	Number of Comments
Sense of achievement / enjoyment in the process of growing own food	51
Taste / freshness / enjoyment of the produce itself	31
Growing organic / knowing what has gone into my food	12
Having an outside space (e.g. live in a flat)	4
Friendship / sense of community / social aspects of allotment site	45
Relaxation / sense of peace and tranquillity	18
Getting exercise	27
Being outdoors / being out in the fresh air	45
Benefits to the children / family life / children learning about growing	11
Therapeutic aspects / having a healthy hobby	7
Access to nature / watching the wildlife	4

There seems to be as much, if not more, enjoyment in the process of growing the vegetables as in the enjoyment of the end product. And the social and community side of allotment gardening is one of the most enjoyable aspects for many people.

There are many references to physical and mental health, with many plot-holders appreciating the sense of peace and tranquillity that can be found in the urban environment whilst out on an allotment plot. A couple of people were very clear that their allotment made a significant contribution to their mental health.

Q. The things I find challenging about having an allotment are:

'Finding enough time to do all I would like on the allotment and finding my fruit and vegetables have eaten by insects etc. The tomato blight last year was a bit of a shock too but something else to learn.'

Once again, the first 100 responses were analysed.

The most challenging aspect of allotment gardening, as reported by the allotment holders, is keeping on top of the weeds. 28 of the first 100 responses listed this among the challenges of having an allotment.

There were some shared frustrations, such as finding sufficient time for the plot (15 comments), heavy clay soil (12), dealing with the pests (10) and the vagaries of the British weather (7). 6 people listed theft or vandalism as a challenging aspect.

However, after that, there were 25 categories of comment with under 5 comments allocated to them. It seems that many of the challenges to allotment gardening are personal or particular to the plot-holder and are not necessarily shared by others.

Analysis of first 100 responses:

Category of Comment	Number of Comments
Keeping on top of the weeds	28
Finding time / not enough hours in the day	15
Heavy digging / heavy clay soil	12
Dealing with the pests (slugs, snails, bugs and birds)	10
The British weather	7
Theft from plot / damage or vandalism	6
Getting rid of rubbish or large amounts of organic waste	4
The amount of work involved in having an allotment	4
Getting manure / compost to the plot	4
The challenge of taking on a neglected / overgrown plot	4
Allotment site politics	4
The time it takes to water the plot	3
Bad behaviour of other allotment holders	3
Overgrowing vegetation on neighbouring allotments	3
Outside factors e.g. family member becoming unwell	2
Access to skips	2
Maintenance of allotment paths	2
Tap quite a long way from plot	2
Plot a long way from the car park	1
No access to water in the winter to clean boots off	1
Difficulty in getting shed erected	1
Personal physical constraints (injury)	1
Can't have a bonfire in the growing season to get rid of allotment waste	1
Having to unlock the gate every time the plot is visited	1
Overhanging trees	1
Smelly chickens	1
Bonfires being held in the summer	1
Keeping small children occupied while working the allotment	1
No electricity on site for electric tools	1
Territory problems	1
Eating all the produce! (too much produce)	1

Out of the first 100 responses, 8 did not list any challenges at all and a further 7 said that they enjoyed the challenges and felt that they were a positive part of having an allotment. One person wrote,

'I do not find my allotment challenging in any way, I just enjoy being there every day.'

Q. How many people benefit overall from the allotment (*Through direct involvement on the plot or being in receipt of allotment produce, or for another reason – please feel free to give details*)

Many responses were specific and detailed e.g.

*‘2 (wife & myself) for involvement
5 family members receiving produce
4 neighbours receiving produce
Total on a regular basis – 11’*

*‘I feed my family and I give extra veg to my friends, neighbours and sometimes work colleagues.

Probably 20 plus but it's hard to put a figure on it.’*

Others were less specific about numbers, simply stating, for example, *‘family, friends and neighbours’*.

Immediate family, friends and neighbours seem to benefit the most, with extended family and friends and work colleagues benefitting from surplus produce at certain times of the year.

Other beneficiaries include a local food bank, homeless kitchen and residents association. Two people said that jams / surplus produce were used to raise funds for charity. One said that they gave produce to acupuncture clients and apparently even some local monks are in receipt of allotment vegetables.

The benefits are not restricted to produce: Sense of well-being is also addressed.

‘Everyone who knows me has benefited as I am much happier in general with the ability to grub in the mud regularly :)’

It seems that the benefits of allotment gardening are felt further and wider than simply looking at the number of allotment plots might suggest.

Using the responses which give specific numbers to approximate those that do not, we were able to estimate the following:

Number who benefit from the plot	Number of survey responses
1 - 4	61
5 - 9	95
10 - 19	62
20 - 35	15

One plot holder estimated that 50 people received produce from their allotment.

Overall, an average of about 8 people benefit from each tenanted allotment and given that there are in the region of 800 Cheltenham Borough Council plots, this signifies a large number of people in the borough who benefit in some way from the allotments. The number is far greater if the privately managed and parish council allotment sites are also taken into account.

Q. I think my allotment is:

very good value good value fair value poor value very poor value

Very good value	70
Good value	77
Fair value	84
Poor value	10
Very poor value	2
No answer / other	4

Q. Do you have any comments on allotment rent?

Just under half (119 out of 247) of those who responded made a comment about plot rent. The responses were analysed for the type of comments made as follows:

Category of Comment	Number of Comments
Rent is reasonable / fair / about right	23
Rent is good value / very good value / well worth it	19
Rent should be less / cheaper / free	10
Cheltenham rents are high / expensive compared with other authorities	15
Rents have gone up a lot in recent years	21
Further increase in rent could impact on decision to have an allotment	23
There should be more concessions available	4
Rents should be higher (deter unworked plots / fund more skips)	2
Comments relating to payment type and timing	4
Comments (other)	3

Although there seems to be a general sense that an allotment in Cheltenham represents fair or good value at the moment, the comments also reveal that some allotment holders are aware that their rents are high in comparison to other authorities and a number of plot-holders have indicated that the rent level is at the upper limit of what they would be willing to pay for the allotment.

Q. The condition / facilities overall of my allotment site are:

Very good good satisfactory poor very poor

Very good	52
Good	122
Satisfactory	62
Poor	8
Very poor	0
No answer	4

In terms of those who answered 'poor', 5 responses relate to Midwinter site and the other 3 relate (one each) to Hatherley Road, Asquith Road and Severn Road. 'Satisfactory' responses related to all sites – none stood out. Overall, 70% of plot-holders indicated that the condition of their site / the facilities were good or very good.

Q. The main issue at my site at the moment is:

The responses were analysed and grouped as follows:

Security / theft	36
Poor maintenance of neighbouring allotment (seeding / spreading weeds)	17
Neglected / abandoned plots need dealing with / moving on quicker	12
Site maintenance (hedges, pathways, toilets)	10
Plot-holders fly-tipping in communal areas	10
Inconsiderate plot-holders (block paths, hog the tap, bad language)	8
Access to skip to dispose of rubbish (placement of skip, timing, frequency)	8
Weeds	7
Rodents (rats, mice)	6
No permanent rubbish disposal arrangements on site (e.g. bins)	6
Waterlogging of area of the site (Midwinter)	6
Access to toilet	6
Difficulty accessing the site, in terms of heavy gate or awkward padlock	5
Shade from over-hanging trees	5
Shed in poor repair	4
Distance to water supply	4
Soil quality, heavy, clay soil	3
Other plot-holders not locking the gate on leaving the site	3
Lack of community spirit	3
No toilet on our site (Severn Road)	2
Inadequate parking at the site	2
Problems in getting manure	2
Too many permanent structures on site	2

47 people left this question blank and a further 38 indicated no major problems at their site (a total of 34% of survey responders).

Security and theft are the stand-out issues at the moment with 15% highlighting them.

17 people raised the issue of untidy or under-worked allotments (spreading weeds) and 12 questioned whether abandoned plots were being dealt with / handed on to new tenants in a timely manner. In a survey in 2007, the majority of tenants identified unworked / abandoned allotments as the major issue so this figure now being under 5% would appear to suggest that there have been improvements in this area of allotments management.

In addition, there were 12 issues raised singularly by individual plot-holders (e.g. no access to mains water in the winter, can't keep cockerels, can't have a bonfire in the summer, no notices in the noticeboard, poorly maintained plot path, no shed...).

One or two to these were very much outside of the Council's control (e.g. it gets dark too early, it's cold). Albeit these are certainly impediments to allotment gardening!

Many of the issues were raised by just one or two plot-holders, providing some good information about the range of difficulties / challenges that people see as the main issue at their allotment site at the current time.

Q. Please give details of any theft or vandalism you have suffered at the allotments in the last 5 years (approximate dates and details please)

Number reporting theft and/or vandalism in last 5 years	85
Number reporting shed break-in	49
Number reporting nothing taken from shed when broken into	39
Number reporting theft of crops from plot	23
Number reporting theft of tools	18
Number reporting theft of other (wood, water butts, chairs, petrol cans)	8
Number reporting theft of personal items (food, drink, torch, stove)	5
Number reporting theft of animals (rabbit, hen)	2
Number reporting needles / drug paraphernalia found on plot	2
Number reporting vandalism (shed fire, poly-tunnel slashed, crop damage)	13

Of the 247 respondents, 85 reported theft or vandalism in the last 5 years.

Many reported a shed break-in that did not result in any theft. Several commented that they do not keep anything of value in their shed nor lock their sheds, to avoid repair bills resulting from speculative shed break-ins.

Three sites accounted for the majority of the reports. While the rest of the sites each accounted for 5 or fewer of the reported incidents, Asquith Road had 11 (out of 70 responses) and Midwinter and Hayden Road had 58 between them. 60% of the tenants at Midwinter and Hayden Road have experienced theft and/or vandalism in recent years (compared with, for example, 8% at Hatherley Rd and 16% at Asquith).

Q. Are there any areas of allotment administration / management you would want improved?

None / all fine / it works / happy with current management / no suggestions	162
Faster turnover of plots that are unworked / abandoned	17
More communication about e.g. skips, competition. More newsletters	14
More skips / skips on demand / council to aid in removal of rubbish	9
Be more on top of people who don't work their plots properly	7
More interesting information in site noticeboards	6
More enforcement of site rules especially about plot path maintenance	4
Better security / lighting at the allotment site	4
No wardens at Midwinter following arson attack last year	4
Problems with warden / site representative	4
Allotment officer on site more often	3
Site maintenance e.g. footpaths, hedges	3
More community events on site	2
Council to clear plots before new tenants start	2
Rent year to start in September / October rather than January	2
I need a key for the loo	2
Faster delivery of tenancy agreements	2

In addition, there were 28 improvements suggested individually by plot-holders, some of which indicated that the plot-holder required some additional information (lift the bonfire ban in winter, allow online rent payments, specify number of chickens permitted, welcome pack for new tenants – all already in place).

Overall, no one issue really stood out. 7% felt that the rate of turnover of unworked plots could be improved, 6% wanted better communication and 4% wanted more skips or better facilities for waste removal.

66% either indicated that they had no suggestions or were happy with current administration / management of allotments, with 70 people leaving the section blank and 92 putting in words that they had no improvements to suggest or were happy with things as they were.

Q. How important are the service extras? (plot competition, skips, newsletters)

Newsletters nice to have / keeping in touch / information / install team spirit	84
Skips essential / very important / more skips please	60
Service extras important / all good to have / help raise community spirit	44
Skips useful and great to have but not necessarily essential	36
Some people value the competition but I'm not bothered personally	31
Not really bothered about the service extras	29
Competition good to have / helps raise standards	23
Really appreciate the delivery of woodchip / leaf litter to site	23
Wasn't really aware of the service extras / what skip?	17
Good if the council could organise large-scale manure or compost deliveries	6
Great to have the noticeboard / good use made of noticeboard	2
Great to have main grass paths at the site mown on regular basis	2

Overall, the extras are well-received, particularly the skips for waste removal. Many people felt that the newsletter helped to keep them informed and to install a sense of an allotment community (not necessarily a 'must have' but a 'nice to have').

Some people felt that the competition helped to increase standards and plot / site maintenance. Others did not place any value on it, albeit some of those recognised that it was important to others, even if they were not interested themselves.

Q. Would you have any interest in self-management of your allotment site?

Yes	27
No	204
Maybe	2
No answer / left blank	14

12% said that they might or would be interested in self-management of their site. 83% said that they would not have any interest in self-management.

Q. Do you have any comments about your interest (if any) in self-management of your allotment site?

Some people felt very strongly that responsibility for the management of allotments should remain with the Council:

'I am NOT interested in this at all! This would just lead to chaos and conflict.'

'I think there would be problems and it is better if rules are set and finances collected separately. Otherwise it could be open to corruption and committees can let power go to their heads making it difficult for people who think differently.'

A few people said that they thought it was an interesting proposition but they lacked the time to be able to get involved in self-management of their site. They did not seem to feel too strongly either way.

'Limited time available but happy to help.'

A small number did express a willingness to get involved in site management, although there was a lack of enthusiasm for the collection of rents and some felt that they would want continued Council involvement, even with self-management.

'I would be happy to contribute to site management particularly if this makes savings or prevents big cost increases.'

Overall, there was little appetite for self-management, with 83% of those who responded to this question stating that they would not be interested in self-management of their site.

Q. How do you think the current warden system works?

For the most part, the feedback on the volunteer site wardens was very positive with many people recognising the significant contribution that they make.

There were many positive comments about current wardens and those who have recently left (at Asquith Road, Warden Hill and Midwinter sites). It was also clear that the wardens themselves adopt slightly different roles, with some being slightly more 'low key' and in the background, available if advice was sought, and others taking a pro-active and visible role in organising site maintenance, social events and more.

At the time of writing, the three sites named above have volunteers assisting with plot letting and informing of any issues (rather than 'official' wardens) and there is a clear need (identified via the survey) to clarify roles and lines of communication. There is also some indication from the survey that in a few cases, the wardens are being held more responsible for site enforcement than is appropriate and additional communication with plot-holders about the warden role should ameliorate this.

'It seems to work well, but is probably a large responsibility for the individuals concerned, and it is probably difficult to find volunteers.'

'Yes. Our warden is usually around a lot and approachable and very keen.'

At one site, there were a handful of negative comments about a site volunteer, but there were a far greater number of positive comments. One to look into further... Overall, the feedback indicates the system works well, where it is in place, and that communication is required to inform plot-holders of alternative arrangements that are currently in place at some sites.

Q. Overall the allotment service is: Very good good satisfactory poor very poor

This drop-down menu option question in the electronic survey was not included in the paper version, meaning that 37 of the 247 surveys did not have a response to this question.

However, of the remaining 210 surveys, the responses were as follows:

Very good	72
Good	102
Satisfactory	28
Poor	2
Very poor	0
Left blank	6

Overall there seems to be a general level of satisfaction with the performance of the Council's allotment service.

Q. I think the allotment service is good at:

Providing allotments (including range of sites and plot sizes)	35
Maintenance, facilities, provision (water, roads, loos, chippings, car park etc)	30
Communication (newsletters, notices, consulting with plot-holders)	28
Good response to problems & enquiries, friendly staff, ease of contact	26
Efficient administration (tenancy paperwork, rent collection)	20
Good at everything / generally all good	12
Enforcement / turnover of unused plots	9
Providing a value for money service	7
Providing secure site	6
Negative / sarcastic comment	2

147 people made a comment and 100 left this question blank.

'My experience of the service has been very good, it is never a problem to chat to either the wardens or officers, all whom are approachable and concerned. The allotment rules and services work well.'

'Providing space for allotments! I know people in other areas of the country who cannot even get on a waiting list.'

'Providing a variety of plot sizes to suit all levels of allotmenters, and maintaining the overall condition of the sites.'

A few people made comments about the Council not being too heavy-handed or prescriptive in how people cultivated their allotments: 'light management touch', 'unobtrusive', and 'allowing us freedom'.

The allotment of 20 years ago would (for the most part) have been neat straight lines of vegetables and little else. However at some sites, this sort of plot is now a rarity. For people living in a flat or with little outside space, a little bit of flexibility and freedom in how they use their allotment space is appreciated. (The Council requires 75% of the plot to be vegetables and fruit growing in the open, giving scope for flowers, ponds, sitting / eating areas, children's areas, chicken runs etc).

Q. I think the allotment service could improve:

All OK, nothing needed, happy with things as they are	23
More skips / bins / additional assistance with rubbish and recycling	12
Enforcement – moving people on when plot not worked	12
Improve site security (including enforcing gate locking by tenants)	11
Better site maintenance (road, sheds, fences, locks...)	10
Better communications (more newsletters, notices, use of internet)	10
Better enforcement (weed control, path maintenance, bad behaviour)	9
Arrange bulk deliveries of manure / compost to site	4
Faster processing of tenancy agreements	4
Lower price of allotment	3
More support for new allotment holders	3
Council to prepare plots before letting	3
More visibility of allotment officer on site	3
Provision of communal equipment	2
Increase the number of plots available to rent in Cheltenham	2
More pest control on allotment sites	2
Council to organise sale of e.g. compost bins, raised beds, water butts	2

123 people left this blank or indicated that they did not have a comment to make.

In addition, there were 15 individual suggestions (e.g. café area on site, more social events, better concession for senior citizen, wardens to undertake weed-spraying, easier access gates, more council sheds, annual voting for wardens, ban on using weed-killing chemicals, seed swap / plant swap club at each site...).

Some of these are nice ideas that could be taken up by individuals or groups on site but perhaps do not fall within the local authority remit (seed swaps, café areas, social events would require additional resources and are not part of the core service).

Q. Do you have any other comments:

We love our allotment / thank you for providing allotments	18
Service is good / keep up the good work	17
Please protect allotments / continue to support provision of allotments	5
Please don't let the rents go up any more / reduce the rent	4
Unable to answer some questions as very new to allotment site	4
Thank you for the opportunity to feedback via this survey	3

In addition, there were 28 areas raised by one (or in a few cases two) people.

A few people (approximately 12) re-iterated something raised previously (no to self-management, need access to the loo, would like bulk compost delivery, site security, wardens should be voted in annually, sorry to see Midwinter wardens go...).

A few more (approximately 14) raised something not previously mentioned (Hayden Rd night lock, annual seed / plant swap, Nursery compost bay at Hayden Two needs turning, extra entrance at far end of site, want more land, reminder needed about dog control, could hosepipe ban be re-introduced, the allotment loo was a waste of money, could we re-introduce site open days to bring in more people, concerned about quality of new roadway at Midwinter, could there be an internet forum for plot-holders, great to have cats on the site to keeping the mice down, council should do more to promote organic growing/reduce use of chemicals).

There were a few general comments (a mixture of positive and negative) but the overall impression gained was that plot-holders are, on the whole, satisfied the allotment service provided by the Council, albeit with a few areas of concern (particularly security at Midwinter and Hayden Road sites) and plenty of suggestions that the service can consider and take forward in putting together the allotment strategy for the next 10 years.

'I love my allotment, and am very grateful that such a facility is made available by CBC. I think they are a vitally important resource and should be protected.'

'As a generality I urge CBC to continue to support the provision of allotments in the town as I think it is a great asset of benefit to families and individuals.'

'I love my allotment. I think allotments are a very important part of our local culture and help us keep in touch with very basic human concerns such as sustainability, care for the environment and community life.'

'Going to my allotment is the highlight of my hectic week!'

'I was so pleased to be able to take on my allotment , in my 4th year now, can't imagine ever giving it up so huge thank you for the facility and service.'