

Growing Places



Cheltenham Borough Council
Allotments Strategy 2015

SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE ALLOTMENT STRATEGY 2015

1.1 Introduction

- 1.1.1 In 2005, Cheltenham Borough Council wrote a detailed allotment strategy.
- 1.1.2 It addressed geographical demand and provision and 5 key areas: effective management, infrastructure, promoting allotment and community gardening, provision and protection of allotments, health, safety and environment.
- 1.1.3 It incorporated an investment programme to install toilets on most sites, improve paths and haulingsways, fences, gates, water supplies and car parking areas. It included provision for community areas, signage, renovation of derelict allotment land, provision of raised beds for wheelchair gardeners, planting of a community orchard, provision of new sheds and more.
- 1.1.4 The strategy was reviewed in 2010, with a revised action plan drawn up to address remaining and emerging items.
- 1.1.5 This 2015 strategy builds on the previous one, addressing the same key areas, noting the current situation and anticipated future developments and highlighting the key themes and action points to be addressed.
- 1.1.6 This ten-year strategy will likewise be reviewed after 5 years.

1.2 Aims of the strategy

1.2.1 The Council looks to recognise the broad appeal of allotment gardening and the contribution it makes to the town and to the quality of life of many who live here. These days, it is more likely to be viewed as a leisure activity than the economic necessity of former times, but the benefits are still considerable:

- Home-grown fruit and vegetables, herbs and flowers
- Exercise and fresh air, offering physical and mental health benefits
- Opportunity for social interaction, friendship, sense of community
- Bio-diversity of both flora and fauna in the urban environment
- Sustainability associated with local food production, composting, recycling

1.2.2 The strategy seeks to ensure the effective management and funding of allotments, the provision of a thriving network of growing spaces that allow for the widest possible participation in allotments and also to address key areas identified in consultation with plot-holders.

1.3 Stakeholders

1.3.1 There are various groups and individuals who have a stake in the provision and management of allotments in Cheltenham and these include:

- Cheltenham Borough Council allotment holders
- Applicants and other potential plot-holders (from all sectors of the community)
- Non-CBC allotment holders and providers (Parish Councils and others)
- Cheltenham & District Allotment Holders' Association (C&DAHA) / groups
- Residents living near to allotment sites
- Local environmental groups and those promoting local food production
- Community, health-care and educational organisations involved in allotments
- The wider community of Cheltenham (environmental and social benefits)

1.4 Structure of the document

1.4.1 This strategy is in 5 sections: The introduction is followed by a section on the supply and demand situation and how this has changed over time. It also highlights areas that plot-holders have identified in a recent customer survey.

1.4.2 The third section addresses the 5 key areas: effective management, infrastructure, promoting allotment and community gardening, provision and protection of allotments and health, safety and environment.

1.4.3 The fourth section details the policy and service standards which can be expected in relation to allotment provision and administration.

1.4.4 The fifth section is the Action Plan detailing the activities to be undertaken within the 5 key areas identified.

SECTION 2. THE CURRENT SITUATION

2.1 Provision of Plots

- 2.1.1 There are 9 allotment sites in Cheltenham managed by the Borough Council, covering an area of 16.03 hectares. In recent years, there has been increasing demand for smaller allotments and so larger plots have been divided. As a result, there are 811 individual allotments available to let (equivalent to 507 standard full-sized plots of 250 square metres).
- 2.1.2 A further 423 standard plots (approximately) are provided by Parish Councils and others and this gives a total number of standard plots in Cheltenham of 930. This equates to approximately 8.5 full-sized plots per thousand people.
- 2.1.3 There is currently a statutory allotment designation on Elmfield Playing Field, equivalent to a further 62 full-sized plots. Since the last strategy was written in 2005, a small area of allotment land was lost at the Holy Apostles Church in Charlton Kings and a small area gained in Windsor Street, with small plots constructed as part of the development of a new care home. This means a small net loss over the 10 year period of approximately 4 plots in Cheltenham.

2.2 Uptake of Plots

- 2.2.1 The Allotment Strategy of 2005 made reference to a slight increase in interest in allotments and raised the question as to whether a renaissance in allotment and community gardening might be around the corner.
- 2.2.2 In fact, interest in allotments snowballed across the country. Food scares relating to pesticide and chemical use, environmental concerns (e.g. food miles) and continual promotion of allotment gardening on television helped to fuel a nationwide allotment 'frenzy' that saw demand peak from 2007 to 2010, with over 300 applicants in 2008 alone for Borough Council sites.
- 2.2.3 With annual plot turnover at around half this rate, for a number of years, waiting lists got longer and longer. The Council identified a need for a large number of additional plots, particularly in the South of the Borough where

turnover was low. At one point, it was estimated that applicants might have to wait up to 7 years for a plot at the popular Asquith Road site or the well-established Hatherley Road site.

- 2.2.4 A strategy was drawn up for the identification of potential new allotment sites and money was set aside for additional provision. Green and open spaces were examined for their potential for use as allotments. Consultation was undertaken in two areas to gauge local views and levels of interest.
- 2.2.5 Then rates of application began to fall, as did the rate of take-up of allotments from the waiting list as applicants became more cautious about diving in to what can be quite a time-consuming occupation. At some sites, take-up fell from 90% to less than 50%. Demand for small plots continued to rise and larger plots were divided, meaning an increase in the number of plots overall.
- 2.2.6 With more plots, lower rates of application and lower take-up of plots, the waiting lists started to fall in 2012 and are back at pre-2005 levels for many sites. By the end of 2014, some sites had just a handful of applicants and a wait for a plot of three or four months.
- 2.2.7 With an understanding of how quickly the supply / demand picture can change, the Council will look to act prudently in terms of additional provision and will also look to work with the Parish Councils and other providers to consider demand for the Borough overall and to develop a strategy to try to address year on year fluctuations in demand for and take-up of plots.

2.3 Geographical distribution of allotments, including parish areas

- 2.3.1 There are allotment sites reasonably well distributed across the Borough, albeit with little provision in the centre and to the east.
- 2.3.2 There are three parishes within the Borough that own and manage allotment sites and two that do not. Parishes are responsible for allotment provision for their populations. The Borough is responsible for non-parish area provision.
- 2.3.3 With Parish residents sometimes living nearer to a Borough site or vice versa, and with two parishes not having allotments, an approach had developed over

time by which most parishes with allotments and the Borough Council accepted other applicants where vacancies permitted.

2.3.4 This became problematic during the period of very high demand when the Borough was looking to develop new allotments but was unable, for legal reasons, to do so in a parish area or to satisfy demand from parish residents. Parishes and Borough alike looked to their statutory responsibilities in terms of allotment provision but this meant, potentially, less choice for the resident.

2.3.5 The Council will seek to work with Parish Councils to clarify procedures for out of area applicants, particularly during periods of low or very high demand.

2.4 Disposal of former allotment land and proceeds of sale

2.4.1 A large area of disused allotment land adjacent to the Midwinter allotment site was put up for sale by the Council for residential development. The scheme selected incorporated the relocation of an area of (then existing but unused) allotments to Elmfield Playing Field (it's relocation also envisaged at the time).

2.4.2 Funds were set aside, from the proceeds of the land sale, for the development of new allotments amounting to £600,000 which included £50,000 to fund infrastructure and site improvements at the adjacent Midwinter allotment site.

2.4.3 There is currently a statutory allotment designation on the Elmfield Playing Field and a planning condition that could trigger development of allotments in the event that allotment demand was to significantly increase.

2.4.4 With significant provision in the area already (Midwinter allotment site has 200 plots and a short waiting list) the preference is to move the statutory designation so that any future development of plots would be in an area of lower provision and proven demand.

2.4.5 Consultation in the Priors area of Cheltenham in summer 2013 revealed a latent demand for allotments, i.e. a number of people who were not on a waiting list elsewhere because they would not travel to a plot but who would be interested in a locally available plot). Priors / Oakley is an area of low allotment provision in Cheltenham.

- 2.4.6 With the Council owning land in the area, there is the option to explore the possibility of moving the statutory allotment designation and possibly to go on to develop a small allotment site in the Priors area, if overall demand / supply in the Borough warranted it or as part of any wider-scale development of the area. There has been a significant increase in housing in recent years.
- 2.4.7 In addition, past proceeds of sale of allotment land have been used to upgrade and develop allotment sites to make them accessible for families and disabled gardeners (upgraded, accessible pathways, fully accessible composting toilets on most sites, community areas, raised beds for wheelchair users).
- 2.4.8 The feedback from the allotment surveys and the allotment site wardens has identified site improvements that could be funded out of sale proceeds, given that the entire sum may not be needed for additional provision.
- 2.4.9 These include additional security for Hayden Road and Midwinter sites, where 60% of plot-holders have experienced theft or vandalism in the last 5 years, reinstating grass paths at Alma Road site, where narrow and uneven paths are an access challenge for some, additional raised bed plots designed for wheelchair use at two sites where there are suitable applicants and possibly a toilet at Severn Road site and new gate and toilet entry systems.

2.5 Link to Council Business Priorities

- 2.5.1 Allotments contribute to two of the three over-arching aims that the Council has for the Borough.
- 2.5.2 The first is that *Cheltenham's environmental quality and heritage are protected, maintained and enhanced* and the second is that *People live in strong, safe and healthy communities*.
- 2.5.3 The feedback from a survey of allotment holders undertaken in the first half of 2015 indicates that the number of people benefitting from each allotment plot is 8, on average, and that the health and well-being benefits to plot-holders and the families and friends who receive produce can be considerable.
- 2.5.4 Moreover, allotments score more highly for bio-diversity than any other

publicly owned green space in the Borough.

2.6 Consultation

- 2.6.1 In early 2015, the Council undertook a survey of allotment holders to gain feedback on the allotment service and to gather information that would inform this allotment strategy. There were 247 responses, representing one third of allotment holders.
- 2.6.2 Overall, most allotment holders were satisfied with the service provision, with 83% of survey responders indicating that they held the Council's allotment service to be good or very good.
- 2.6.3 The main issues that stood out were the need for additional security measures at the Midwinter and Hayden sites and that the level of allotment rent is now at the upper limit of what some people would be prepared to pay.
- 2.6.4 It was useful to note that 70% of plot-holders spent over 5 hours each week on their allotment and that 8 people, on average, benefitted from each plot (which means a significant number of people across Cheltenham, if all Borough and non-Borough plots are included.)
- 2.6.5 There was little interest in self-management of sites, with 29 people expressing some level of interest versus 204 who said they were not interested in self-management.
- 2.6.6 In terms of the service 'extras', assistance with rubbish removal (skips) was firmly supported by many plot-holders, as was the communication with plot-holders via the annual newsletter. There was slightly less support for the annual plot competition. Some felt it helped to raise standards and enjoyed taking part. A slightly higher number were not interested themselves (albeit many of those recognised the importance for others).

3. SECTION 3: KEY AREAS IN ALLOTMENTS MANAGEMENT

3.1 Section Overview

3.1.1 The following 5 key areas are explored in this section:

1. Effective management
2. Infrastructure
3. Promoting allotments and community gardening
4. Provision and protection of allotments
5. Health, safety and environment

3.2 Key Area 1: Effective management and administration

3.2.1 The allotment strategy of 2005 highlighted key areas in the administration of allotment sites:

- To ensure the effective day to day maintenance and operation of allotment sites
- to provide an effective and efficient administration system
- to charge fair and affordable rents with an appropriate range of discounts and payment systems
- to offer a range of plot sizes and shared plots
- to provide the staff and financial resources necessary for effective management
- to seek other sources of income to support allotments, e.g. grants
- to provide help and support to new tenants
- to consult plot holders and their representatives on the day-to-day management and strategic direction of allotments

3.2.2 A number of measures were implemented over the course of the 2005-2015 allotment strategy, including computerised administration software, widening of the volunteer warden role, re-writing the tenancy agreement, review of, and increase in, allotment rents, review of office procedures (with an increase in use of electronic communications), allotment information and application pages on the Council's website re-written, allotments administration becoming a full-time post.

- 3.2.3 The number of small and half-sized allotments increased significantly, to respond to the demand for smaller allotments as more families and working people took up plots and the number of community allotments also increased.
- 3.2.4 Moving forwards, developments in technology should enable further efficiencies in the delivery of allotment administration and the service will continue to liaise with other authorities and technology providers to keep up to date with the options.
- 3.2.5 Sponsorship and / or grants could be sought to support additional improvements or existing items (e.g. gaining commercial sponsorship of the newsletter(s) or the allotment competition, to help fund the service 'extras' which are of value to many allotment holders).
- 3.2.6 In terms of support for new tenants, the service offers some advice, via a leaflet, on clearing a plot and liaises for skip provision if rubbish has been left by a previous tenant. There is a lot of information available on the internet and the volunteer site wardens often give advice and assistance. Additional support can be considered.
- 3.2.7 Consultation continues, via the volunteer site wardens and the C&DAHA and directly with allotment holders through surveys and feedback requests.

3.2.8 Objective: To continue to develop the allotment service to ensure efficient and effective management and administration

3.3 Key Area 2: Infrastructure

3.3.1 The Council is responsible for allotment site infrastructure and it is included in the inspection regimes for parks and green spaces. There is a small budget at the disposal of the allotment officer for maintenance of existing site infrastructure. The strategy of 2005 identified 3 key areas for improvement:

- Site security
- vehicle and foot access
- toilet facilities

3.3.2 Funds for the delivery of improvements to site infrastructure were secured

through the 2005 allotment strategy from proceeds of sale of former allotment land off Howell Road. Toilets were installed on all sites, except for the Severn Road site where there were only 7 allotment holders and no requirement for a toilet. Security and access were addressed with paths and roadways upgraded at several sites and new fencing and gates installed where required.

- 3.3.3 Emerging issues include degraded grass pathways at Alma Road site and tarmac roadways at Midwinter site and the need for improved security measures at Hayden Road and Midwinter sites (where 60% of tenants have experienced theft or damage).
- 3.3.4 In addition, there are emerging requirements to upgrade water supplies on allotment sites to reduce the risk of contamination of the general water supply. Some water authorities are now requiring use of a specific type of dip tank or an expensive air gap device for allotment site water supplies or sites face their supplies being cut off. This could require significant resources.
- 3.3.5 In terms of catering for disabled gardeners, there are two sites with people waiting for an adapted plot (Asquith and Midwinter sites) similar to the raised bed plots installed at Terry Ashdown and Hayden Road sites in 2007.
- 3.3.6 There is also a small group of allotment holders at Severn Road who have expressed the desire to have a toilet on site.
- 3.3.7 Once costed, the Council will be in a better position to prioritise these proposed investments. Funds for the delivery of these additional infrastructure improvements could be secured using some of the funds set aside for new allotment provision, given that the supply and demand situation has stabilised.
- 3.3.8 Objective: To continue to maintain the infrastructure of allotments and deliver the improvements identified, dependant on priorities and funding**

3.4 Key Area 4: Promoting allotment and community gardening

- 3.4.1 When the 2005 allotment strategy was written, it was felt that many groups were under-represented on allotment sites. It was hoped that with additional support and information, as well as the provision of toilets, improved signage and community areas, women, families, people with special needs and people

on low incomes would be encouraged to take up the opportunity to work an allotment.

3.4.2 In fact, with the extensive presence of allotment gardening in the media, the job of promoting allotments was largely accomplished. Many women, families, younger people, working people, community groups, education providers, mobility scooter users, ethnic minority groups and more took up allotments.

3.4.3 With the recent fall in applications and the prospect of vacant plots on two sites, the Council has once again started to advertise / market the allotments, issuing a press release in early 2015 that waiting lists were very short for the Midwinter and Hayden Road sites. A number of applications resulted.

3.4.4 The allotment service will draw up a marketing plan to be put into action if waiting lists drop below a 3 month wait for a plot. It is preferable to have a short waiting list, rather than vacant plots deteriorating while waiting to be let.

3.4.5 Objective: To develop a simple marketing and media plan to promote allotment gardening to ensure the continued uptake of plots and increase the value placed on allotments by the community as a whole

3.5 Key area 4: Provision and protection of allotments

3.5.1 Cheltenham Borough Council has demonstrated a strong commitment to the provision and protection of allotments in terms of the resources allocated to the development and management of allotments and the increase in the number of allotments through the renovation of derelict allotment land.

3.5.2 Future measures for the provision and protection of allotments include:

- Use planning process to ensure provision in large-scale residential developments
- Explore option to relocate Elmfield playing field allotment designation to a location in the east of the borough where supply is lower and there is latent demand
- Continue to support the allotment service with the resources required to deliver the infrastructure improvements identified and to ensure efficient administration

- Work with the parish councils to look at the overall picture of supply and demand across the borough and seek to work cooperatively with the parish councils to manage over/under supply and waiting lists
- Continue to consult with allotment holders on changes in allotment provision

Objective: To ensure that there are enough allotments in the right locations, using the guidelines above

3.6 Key Area 5: Health, Safety and Environment

3.6.1 While many allotment holders and organisations recognise the health and environmental benefits of allotment gardening, there are also some risks associated with horticultural activities that need to be identified and managed.

3.6.2 Some potential risks arise from infrastructure issues e.g. quality of roadways, whilst others arise from activities of plot holders e.g. use of garden machinery and tools. Some arise from changes in legislation, e.g. Food & Environment Protection Act 1985 or Water Supply (Water Fittings) Regulations 1999.

3.6.3 Over the course of the previous strategy, measures were introduced to identify and manage health and safety risks, including regular infrastructure inspections and a health and safety leaflet for allotment holders.

3.6.4 In addition, a leaflet was given to allotment holders explaining how they could manage their plot to support wildlife and wildlife habitats. This coincided with a general desire among plot-holders to decrease the amount of chemicals used in food production and it is likely that there have been environmental benefits, although not quantified through any empirical research at a local level.

3.6.5 With wardens meetings taking place less frequently and changes in advice at a national level, the health and safety and environment policy in relation to allotments will be reviewed to ensure that the Council's approach is current.

Objective: To continue to improve the risk management of allotments and promote the health and environmental benefits

4. SECTION 4: POLICY AND STANDARDS OF SERVICE

As stated in the 2005-2015 allotment strategy, the Council will look to:

- 4.1 Provide sufficient high quality allotments, in the right places, to meet the needs of the people of Cheltenham. This will involve:
- Protecting allotment land from the pressures of development, neglect and vandalism
 - Securing the provision of new allotments in areas of need
- 4.2 Provide an excellent service to plot holders from which they can expect:
- High quality, safe sites, accessible to all parts of the community and supported by appropriate infrastructure
 - Efficient and effective administration
 - Fair rents and charges
 - Advice, information and assistance
- 4.3 Promote allotments:
- To potential tenants, especially those groups under-represented in the allotment community
 - To the wider community so that they become aware of the value of allotments and their contribution to a sustainable town
- 4.4 Consult with and involve allotment holders in the management of allotments, from both operational and strategic perspectives
- 4.5 Provide adequate resources to achieve the above and to invest in the allotment service and infrastructure using monies received from the sale of former allotment land or other sources.

5. SECTION 5: ACTION PLAN

This section proposes actions over the next 10 years by the Borough Council and others to help achieve the aims of the strategy. The actions are grouped according to the five key areas previously identified.

5.1 Key Action 1: Effective Management

Objective: To continue to develop the allotment service to ensure efficient and effective management and administration

ACTION	WHO	TIMESCALE	RESOURCES
Continue to work with and support on-site wardens and volunteers who assist with plot-lettings and day to day liaison about site issues and unworked plots. Undertake a survey of volunteers and wardens to facilitate this process.	Allotment Officer Wardens	On-going August 2016	Current internal resources
Attend regional allotment officer forums / GATPC meetings as and when organised to keep current with best practice and national advice.	Allotment Officer	Annual / as and when organised	Current internal resources
Restrict allotment rent increases to inflationary amounts in light of survey feedback and legal requirements in relation to allotment rents. Review in 5 years.	Allotment Officer	2015-2019 End 2020	Current internal resources
Monitor and continue to divide plots if the demand for smaller allotments continues. Continue with policy of allotment holders taking medium or half plot (or smaller) in the first instance, but with the possibility to have a full-sized or large plot when available, once initial area deemed by officers to be fully cultivated.	Allotment Officer	On-going	Current internal resources
Seek additional funding e.g. sponsorship of newsletters / competitions as and when internal resources may become available to undertake.	Unidentified	Unidentified	Additional resources
Review support for new allotment holders with site representatives and implement changes identified that can be undertaken within current resources (e.g. changes to literature, use of on-line links, volunteer mentors on site).	Allotments Officer and Wardens	December 2016	Current internal resources

5.2 Key Action 2: Infrastructure

Objective: To continue to maintain the infrastructure of allotments and deliver the improvements identified, dependant on priorities and funding

ACTION	LED BY	TIMESCALE	RESOURCES
<p>Obtain costings for identified site infrastructure improvements and consult with site representatives and Cabinet Member to prioritise. Approve virement of funds (proceeds of sale) set aside for allotment provision to fund prioritised improvements.</p>	<p>Parks Development Manager and Allotments Officer</p>	<p>Initial costings, prioritising and allocation of funds by end 2016</p>	<p>Capital funding (proceeds of sale of former allotment land)</p>
<p>All sites All water supply equipment (in light of current regulations) Site entrance locks / system for ease of entry and security and to reduce cost and administration to Council of issuing individual keys Key box for toilets to negate requirement for individual toilet keys (Council) shed repair fund (materials only)</p>			
<p>Alma Road Reinstatement of narrow and uneven grass pathways</p>			
<p>Asquith Road Development of disabled raised bed plot</p>			

<p>Hayden Road</p> <p>Security measures (increased gate height, anti-vandal paint, lighting at entrance, use of security cameras)</p> <p>Reparations to disabled raised beds</p>			
<p>Midwinter</p> <p>Security measures (increased gate height, anti-vandal paint, lighting at entrance, use of security cameras)</p> <p>Improvements to tarmac roadway</p> <p>Development of disabled raised bed plot</p>			
<p>Severn Road</p> <p>Allotment toilet</p>			

5.3 Key Action 3: Promoting allotment gardening

Objective: To develop a simple marketing and media plan to promote allotment gardening to ensure the continued uptake of plots and increase the value placed on allotments by the community as a whole

ACTION	LED BY	TIMESCALE	RESOURCES
Prepare press release and other materials (leaflet, tweet, facebook update) to be used if/when plot waiting lists drop below 3 months.	Allotments Officer	April 2016 On-going	Current internal resources
Continue to look for opportunities to promote allotment gardening in the local media	Allotments Officer	Minimum of 2 media releases per annum	Current internal resources
Draw up a list of organisations that could be approached for marketing campaign in the event that allotment waiting lists evaporate e.g. CBH, large local employers, local publications reaching various groups, local radio etc	Allotments Officer Communica-tions Team	April 2016 On-going	Current internal resources

5.4 Key Action 4: Provision and protection of allotments

Objective: To ensure that there are enough allotments in the right locations

ACTION	LED BY	TIMESCALE	RESOURCES
Explore the option to relocate the allotment designation from Elmfield Playing Field to council owned land in Priors area of Cheltenham and subsequently explore options to develop new site as stand-alone or as wider development of the area	TBC	TBC	Current internal resources
Ensure provision of additional allotments in large-scale residential developments through the planning process.	Green Space Development Manager Planning Officers	On-going	Current internal resources
Liaise with the parish councils to consider supply and demand across the borough and develop joint / shared policies with regard to surplus allotments and waiting lists in other areas	Allotment Officer	Meeting every two years as a minimum	Current internal resources
Develop a policy to address changing allotment demand and consult on possible measures such as offering additional plots to existing plot-holders at reduced rent as 'potato grounds' or allowing plot-holders to have multiple plots in the event that demand drops to the extent that there are vacant / unwanted plots.	Allotment Officer Site Wardens Consultation with allotment holders	End 2016	Current internal resources

5.5 Key Action 5: Health, Safety and Environment

Objective: To continue to improve the risk management of allotments and promote the health and environmental benefits

ACTIONS	WHO	TIMESCALE	RESOURCES
Review the health and safety policy for allotments, including frequency of inspections, permissible items (e.g. ponds, glass greenhouses) and information given to allotment holders	Parks Development Manager Allotments Officer Corporate Health and Safety Advisor	June 2016	Current internal resources
Review water supply equipment at all allotment sites and make recommendations based on current regulations	Properties Dept. Allotments Officer	December 2016	Current internal resources
Review and amend advice given to allotment holders on legal, safe and environmentally friendly allotment gardening techniques	Ecology Ranger Allotments Officer	December 2016	Current internal resources
Explore options to undertake a survey of the wildlife and biodiversity of allotments. Identify areas/features for protection and enhancement.	Ecology Ranger Allotments Officer Local nature organisations	December 2017	Current internal and external resources

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