State of the Market Survey 2018
Local Authority Allotment Services

Briefing 18 -31
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Local Authority Allotment Services

State of the Market 2018

APSE conducted an online allotment survey between May and June 2018. This follows on from a series of previous surveys which were conducted in 2017, 2016, 2015, 2013, 2012, 2010 and 2008. The 2018 survey asks similar questions to the previous surveys in order to allow for comparisons to be drawn from previous years. In total, 140 responses were received from local authorities throughout the UK. This report identifies the key findings.

Results from the survey

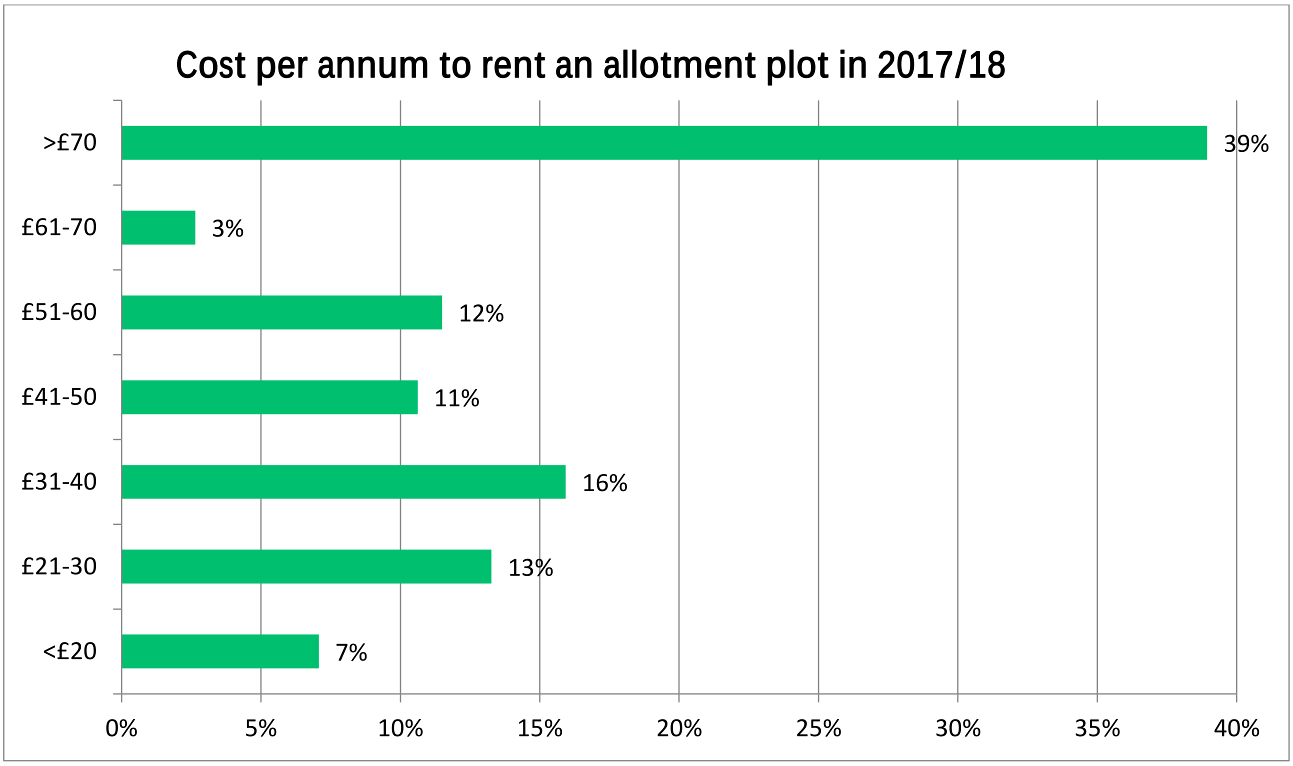
a) Number and management of allotments

96% of respondents answered that they have council owned allotments within their authority which is a fall of 4% from the last surveys which may suggest new allotment sites have been closed or ownership transferred to community groups.

In terms of management of the allotments, 28% answered that they have allotments which are directly managed by a council officer, which is a fall of 4% on last year's results, 7% stated that allotment sites are managed through a site committee/association (a 1% fall on 2017). 65% of respondents stated that they have a mix of council and site committee/association managed sites, which is a 5% rise on last year's survey results, suggesting that there is a growing number of sites being jointly managed by councils and community committees.. This approach appears to be a growing trend as figures show that this figure has risen by 9% over the last two years.

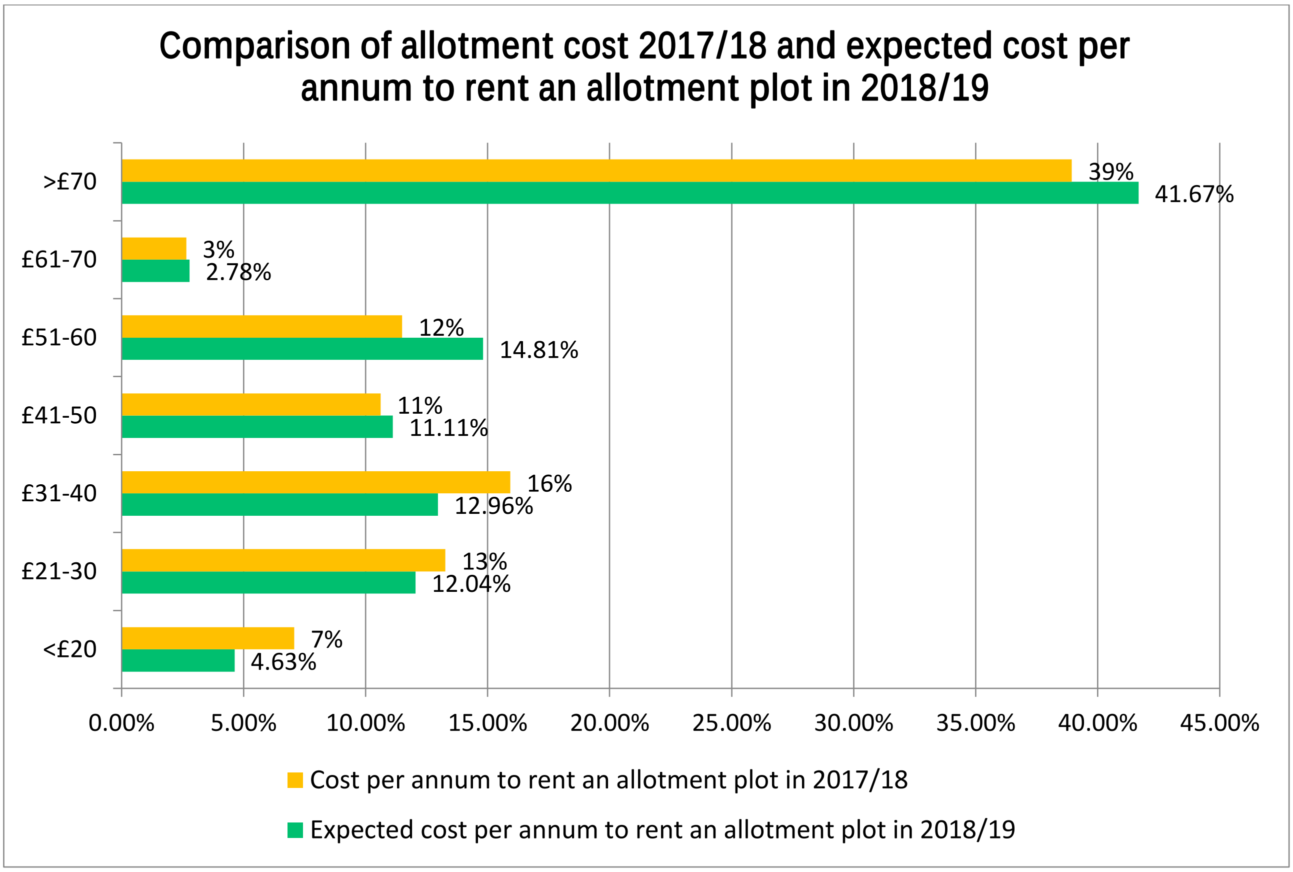
b) Cost of allotments

There was a wide range of prices for renting allotments, but the largest proportion of local authorities now charge over £70 per annum to rent an allotment in 2017-18. The fact there is a wide variety of charges below this cost suggest size and facilities may have a part to play, but it is noticeable most local authorities are now implementing charges which may now at least cover the cost of maintenance rather than subsidising the allotment service which for many would have been the previous practice.



The survey asked about the expected increases in the rent of an allotment plot in 2019 as compared to 2018. It appears that there is likely to be little change in allotment cost, However, almost (c.3%) will be charging £70 or over, than they were in 2017/18.

The chart below shows the expected levels of increase in 2019.



The majority of respondents (74%), replied that the cost for an allotment is directly related to the area of the allotment (e.g. square metres) whilst 20% stated that the charge is standard regardless of the size. This is a 4% decrease on 2017, but this does shows that the size of an allotment is still the determining factor for charging criteria. With regards to levels of increased costs, only 17% of respondents stated they had increased allotment costs above the standard level of inflation which is a significant fall on 2017, when 43% stated their increases were above the level of inflation, perhaps a result of allotment holders concerns.

In 2018 38% of respondents now state that they will be continuing to increase allotment costs over the next five years and a further 30% replied that they were currently reviewing allotment costs. However in 2017 46% of respondents said they were intending to increase costs over the next 5 years this fall could again be a reflection of allotment holder pressure to prevent further price increases.

Despite these increases only 32% reported that the provision of allotments would become cost neutral as a result of their charges which is a fall of 4% on 2017 figures. So it appears, despite price increase to allotment holders, costs of service provision are increasing faster. 67% said that they would still need to subsidise the cost of allotment provision, which is an increase of 3%. Only 1% said they would make a profit.

There was a split in the respondents who offered concessionary prices (60%) and those that did not (40%). From those who offer concessions, the breakdown is as follows:

- 88% offer discounts for pensioners, over 60's and/or retired people. The majority of these (58%) offer a 40-50% discount.
- 52% offer discounts to the unemployed or those on income support. The majority of these (53%) offer a 40-50% discount.
- 52% offer discounts to people with disabilities. The majority of these (50%) offer a 40-50% discount.
- 30% offer discounts to students. Of these, the majority (32%) offer a discount of 40-50%.

c) Size of allotments

In terms of the size of plots available, 4% stated that they have a standard size for a plot, and out of these, the most common size was 200-249 square metres (33%) whereas in 2016 the most common size was 250-299 square metres (50.0%) This clearly shows there has been a reduction in allotment sizes. Many respondents commented that they have other plot sizes are available.

When asked for the total number of allotment sites in the local authority, the majority responded that they had 1-30 (66%), with several having 31-40 (14%) and the rest having over 40 (20%). When asked for the total number of allotment plots in the local authority, the majority (56%) had 1000 or less and 35% had up to 2250 plots with only11% having over 2500 plots.

The reporting of waiting lists show the demand for allotments is still high, with 75% of respondents having 100-400 people in the waiting list for an allotment compared to 72% in 2017, and 8% claiming they have over 1000 people on their waiting list which was the same percentage in 2017. The majority of respondents (90%) stated that the waiting list is regularly updated (e.g. names of people who are no longer interested or those who have moved are removed). With regards to average waiting time for an allotment plot over 40% stated that over 18 months was the average, which is a significant drop from 2017 when the figure was 52%.

9% of respondents could guarantee a plot within 6 months which is a considerable decrease on 2017 when the figure was 20%. The average waiting time is now between 6-18 months (47%). Under 5 % of respondents can offer an allotment plot within 3 months.

72% of respondents stated that new tenancies are restricted to people living within the local authority area.

2017 figures showed that only 63% of new tenancies were offered to local people, which may be one of the reasons why longer waiting time have fallen i.e. over 18 months.

d) Future increases in the number of allotments

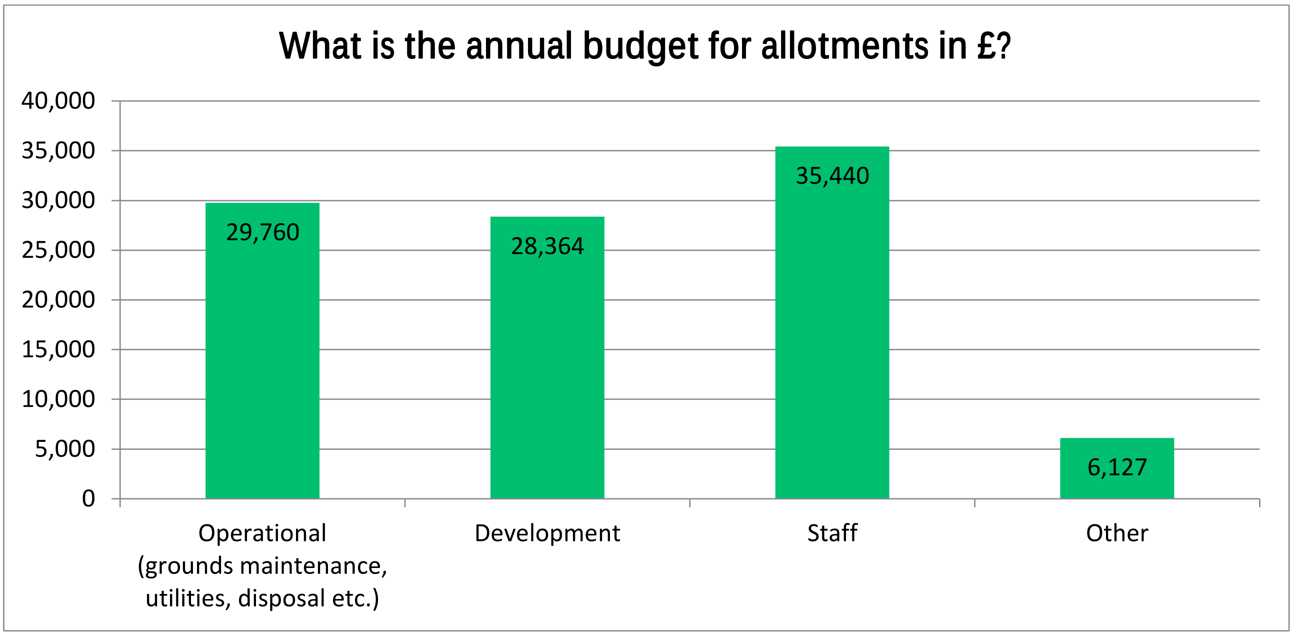
36% of respondents stated that their council plans to increase the number of allotments. From those respondents who stated that the number of allotments is planned to increase, the method of doing this is shown in the table below:

Direct provision by the council for additional plots	**78.38%**
Provision by builders/developers as part of a housing/planning policy	**70.27%**
Provision by community groups supported/facilitated by council	**32.43%**
Provision by other council departments (e.g. Education, Social Work) as part of a healthy lifestyles/eco-schools/health type project	**13.51%**
Other	**5.41%**

What is noticeable is that the provision by the council has increased significantly from 59% in 2017 to over 78% in 2018. Similarly there has been a significant rise in builders/developers providing allotments.

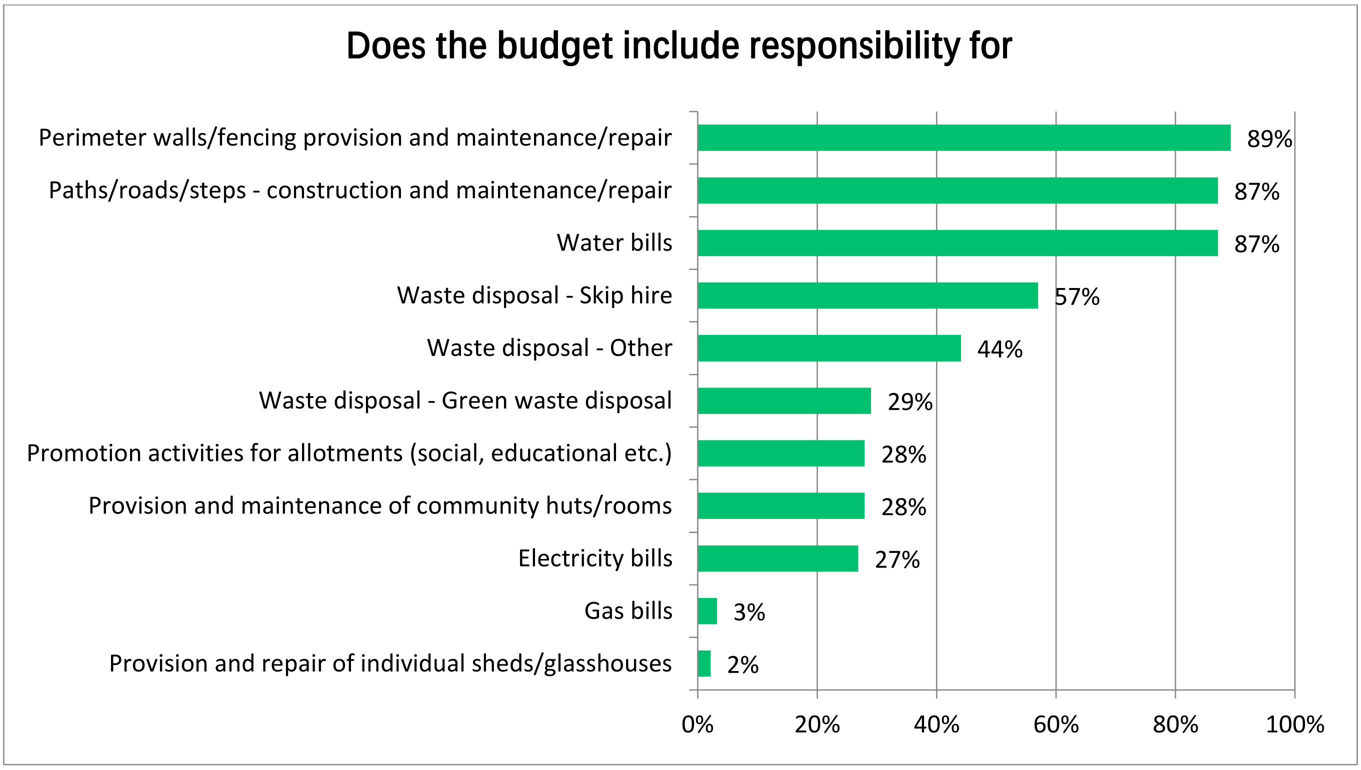
e) Budget for allotments

The average annual budgets for allotments were stated as follows:



These figures show a slight fall in staffing cost against 2017 but a significant increase in development costs as compared to 2017. This increase is likely to be a result of the increased provision of allotments directly by councils and the move to ensure builders and developers are providing allotments within their new developments. Staffing costs have also risen, again perhaps a reflection of greater direct service provision by local authorities.

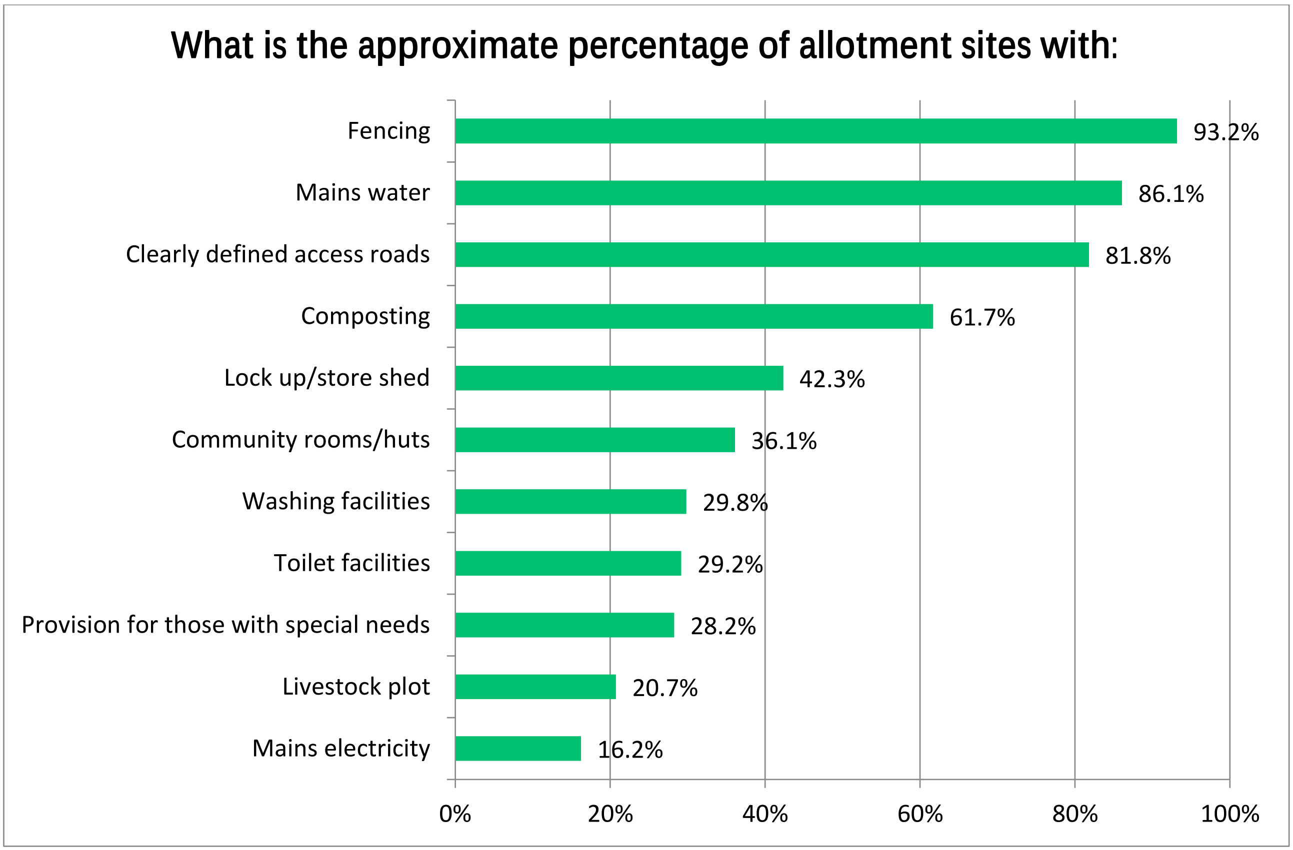
Respondents stated that their budget includes responsibility for the following:



It is noticeable from the figures that there has been increases in responsibility levels for infrastructure (paths, walls, fencing etc. Possibly many of these costs are no longer able to be borne by allotment associations even where sites are jointly managed as income from rents are not sufficient to cover expensive works often associated with infrastructure maintenance/improvements.

f) Facilities at allotment sites

Most allotment sites provide water, fencing, clearly defined access roads and composting. Some allotment sites have other services such as livestock plots, community rooms, lock up/store sheds, washing facilities and toilet facilities. The full breakdown in terms of the average percentage of allotment sites with 'other facilities' is as follows:



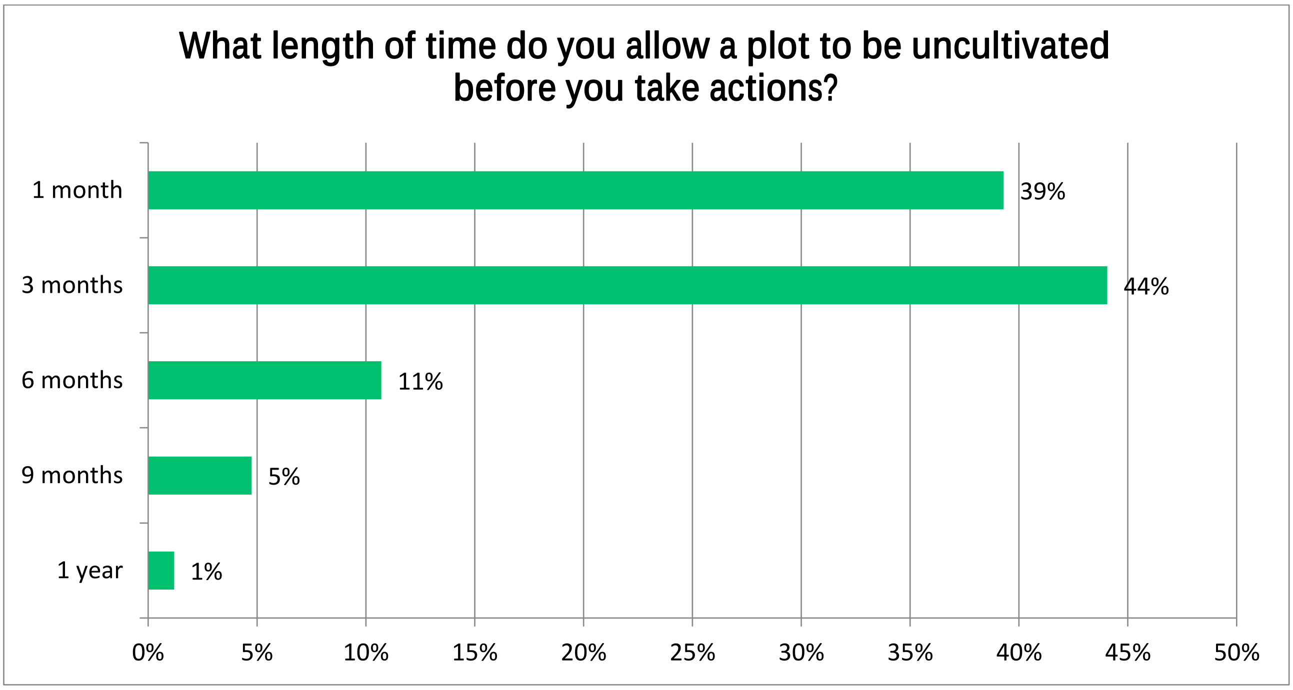
The most noticeable increase has been with regards to the provision of mains electricity which has nearly doubled in responses received, 9.81% (2017) to 16.2% (2018).

The majority of respondents (59.60%) stated that grounds maintenance is carried out either at allotment sites as an integral part of grounds maintenance operations/contracts or by plot-holders/site association (58.59%). It is noticeable when compared with 2016, there has been an increase of the amount of respondents building grounds maintenance into local authority contracts as opposed to the plot-holders carrying out the work which has seen a 17% fall since 2016. The full responses are as follows:

As an integral part of grounds maintenance operations/contracts	**59.60%**
By the plot holders/site association	**58.59%**
By volunteers	**25.25%**
By a dedicated allotments team/person	**15.15%**
As part of rehabilitation programmes (health, offenders etc.)	**12.12%**
No grounds maintenance is carried out on the sites	**7.07%**
Other	**6.06%**

(Please note, respondents could choose more than one option on the survey for this answer).
When asked how grounds maintenance is monitored, the majority stated that this is through inspections/site visits by an allotment officer (50%). Other responses included a council officer (50%) or a site representative (41%).

The survey asked how cultivation standards are monitored and the most frequent responses to this question as displayed in the chart below:



Survey responses showed that there has been a decrease in monthly and 3 monthly inspections but a corresponding increase in half yearly, 9 monthly and annual inspections. It was also noted in the comments that additional monitoring may be carried out in response to complaints from other tenants/residents, and that the inspections may alternate between an officer and the site committee and may become more frequent during the height of the growing season.

g) Monitoring allotments

The majority of respondents allow plots to be uncultivated for 3 months (44%) before they take action. However, 40% still monitor monthly. Notice procedures for tenants who fail to cultivate their plots vary from authority to authority, but are generally around 28-30 days' notice with an initial warning letter followed by an inspection; if no action to cultivate the plot has been taken after a defined period of time, either a termination of tenancy is undertaken or the plot-holder is put onto a probationary period.

Many respondents allow plot holders to have more than one plot, but this is subject to:

- Historical plots (i.e. those who had several plots can keep them, but new tenants are not allowed more than one plot)
- Waiting lists (tenants can have more than one if there are no waiting lists)
- Time limits (tenants can have extra plots on a year-to-year basis, subject to waiting lists)
- Household limits (where tenants are allowed more than one plot, but the amount each household can have is limited)
- Plot size (yes, but they are limited to a restricted amount of square metres)

40.0% of respondents restrict plot ownership to a person or a household. 34% of respondents allow plots to be passed on to families and friends possibly a reflection of trying to reduce waiting lists. 85% of respondents have considered reducing future plot sizes to create more plots. 21% of respondents stated that plot-holders are required to undertake a probationary period to ensure they can manage their plot effectively.

54% of respondents stated their authority has a policy in place for handling disputes between its tenants and 59% have a policy in place for handling appeals against notices to quit. 57% of respondents stated that their authority requires their self-managed sites to have policies in place to address the issues above.

h) Security

Plot-holders themselves generally manage the security on allotment sites (67%) with 36% of respondents stating that they don't actively manage security. 9% stated that they have a 'plot watch' scheme or something similar, 4% stated that park rangers manage security and 5% stated that community wardens manage security.

Comments from respondents included that they have lockable gates (some with a suite of security locks and keys that can't be cut by tenants), that community wardens/Police Scotland will respond to hot spots and specific incidents, and allotments are now linked to the Council's Community Safety Team.

i) Allotment strategy

49% of respondents stated that they have an allotments strategy and of the 51% that haven't currently got a strategy in place, 37% stated that the council is planning to develop one within the next 2 years. 60% stated that their health and wellbeing strategy recognises the value of allotments.

56% of Local authorities have a Friends Group/ Forum or similar.

66% of respondents now include allotments into their Local Plans and 60% have the value of allotments recognised within their Health and Well-Being strategies.

j) Biodiversity

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

Areas being set aside for wildlife	**75.41%**
Planting pollinator friendly species	**55.74%**
Information on how to improve biodiversity	**55.74%**
Promoting native crops	**29.51%**
Other	**26.23%**

Other than the promotion of native crops all the areas above have seen significant increases between 2017 and 2018. Other responses in relation to promoting biodiversity, included "encouraging bees by allowing beehives on plots" and "network of bee keepers". A growing number of sites are now planting pollinator friendly species to help address the decline in pollinator habitats.

100.0% of respondents stated that environmental sustainability is promoted with regards to site management by adopting water-saving measures such as water butts (97%). 53% stated that they cultivate plots organically and almost 20% of allotment sites have begun to use solar power instead of mains power.

APSE Comment

From the answers received to the survey it is quite clear that local authorities are continuing to provide and manage allotment sites across the UK, often working closely with local allotment users themselves. The value of allotments is widely recognised across a number of fronts including healthier lifestyles, promoting biodiversity, protecting green spaces, reducing air miles re local food production, providing valuable soakaways in times of heavy rain and their value to pollinators has also been highlighted.

The Government's **25 Year Environment Plan** has highlighted the need to use resources from nature more sustainably and efficiently, and ensuring that food is produced sustainably and profitably. Although perhaps looking more at agricultural practice, it can be argued that allotments can meet the aims of this objective when used to their full potential.

The plan has also stated as one of its aims to, make sure that there are *'high quality, accessible, natural spaces close to where people live and work, particularly in urban areas, and encouraging more people to spend time in them to benefit their health and wellbeing'*. Again allotments are excellent examples of how people can interact with their local areas, improve their physical and mental well-being whilst also ensuring the areas green infrastructure is also enhanced and protected. This latter point has been further emphasised as part of a parliamentary Environmental Audit Commission report which has recommended as a responses to the recent heatwave that Government *'ensures local authorities and cities have green spaces and heat resilient infrastructure'. The report goes on to add that, 'Green spaces have proven to reduce the urban heat island effect'* Allotments through careful planting can also contribute to this requirement.

As well as environmental benefits allotments are seen as having considerable social cohesion benefits where all sectors of the local community can engage in a common interest where skills and knowledge can be exchanged and friendships forged.

However, the increasing demand for building land and the lack of plots for new allotment holders is causing concern amongst allotment holders as is the reductions in council budgets which is having an impact on the ability to maintain such sites. In light of these pressures, many allotment sites are now moving to self-management models, often with the continuing support of the local authority. In this way allotment holders can not only ensure what finance is available is used to meet the known needs of the site, but they are also able to apply for funding which is not available to local authorities. This allowance by local authorities for allotment holders to manage their own sites should not be seen as them negating their responsibilities, as many are now building the importance of allotments into their Health and Well-Being Strategies and also their Local Development Plans. This latter point is evident within the survey where many have reported they are using new developments to provide additional allotment sites.

The other option to provide new sites or improve existing ones is partnership working with agencies such as the NHS, who more and more are seeing the therapeutic value of green space and are willing to invest in such facilities. Equally the intergenerational value of allotments has been recognised as one way which anti-social behaviour can be reduced as different age groups work together and share common experiences. Finally, from a biodiversity and environmental sustainability point of view, local authorities and allotment holders themselves, are developing and managing sites which bring added value to these aspects.

It is unlikely that local authorities will ever make high levels of income from allotments, indeed many are openly subsidising allotments, but when one considers the multiple benefits they bring, they are acknowledged as being a key community asset and one which local residents, allotment holders and agencies across the country are increasingly helping to sustain.

Wayne Priestley
Principal Advisor

The Association for Public Service Excellence

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Advisory groups are a free service included as part of your authority's membership of APSE and all end with an informal lunch to facilitate networking with peers in other councils. If you do not currently receive details about APSE advisory group meetings and would like to be added to our list of contacts for your service area please email enquiries@apse.org.uk.

Our national advisory groups include:-

Facilities Management & Building Cleaning

Catering

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Environmental Health

Housing and Building Maintenance

Local authorities' income generation, trading and commercialisation network

Parks and Horticulture

Renewables and Climate Change

Roads highways and street lighting

Sports and Leisure

Vehicle maintenance and transport

Waste, Refuse and Street scene

If you require any further information on the findings of this State of the Market survey 2018 please contact Wayne Priestley Principal Advisor for Environmental Services at wpriestley@apse.org.uk