

Allotment waiting lists in England 2013



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Summary

This survey of the allotment waiting lists held by the English principal local authorities is an update of similar surveys carried out in 2009, 2010 and 2011.

All 323 English principal authorities were surveyed in January 2013, and 321 responded. The main findings were

- 215 (67%) of the authorities held waiting list data
- this data was for a total of 3,558 allotment sites (averaging 17 sites per council)
- these allotment sites contained 152,432 plots (averaging 43 plots per site)
- the waiting lists for these plots totalled 78,827 people
- this is an average of 52 people waiting for every 100 plots.

Compared to the similar survey 2 years ago, the average waiting list has changed from 57 to 52 people waiting per 100 plots. In view of the considerable uncertainties around the total figures, we feel that this is best summarised as allotment waiting lists remaining high.

New allotment sites were brought into use by 51 councils in the last two years. The total number of new sites was 65. For the 58 sites where information was supplied, the total area of the new sites was 30 hectares, and the total number of plots on these new sites was 1,950.

In conclusion, waiting lists for allotments remain high. Even at a time of budgetary restraint, a strong argument can be made for a large increase in allotment provision because

- food grown on allotments means fewer food miles, and could be an important part of the new greener low-carbon economy
- allotment sites often provide a focus for a community, and improve community cohesion
- growing one's own food is an important part of a healthy-eating programme
- allotments offer a productive activity for the unemployed
- local and national government reports have been promoting the benefits of allotments for some time
- local authorities have a statutory duty to provide sufficient allotments.



Introduction

The benefits of allotments are well established [1] [2]:

- providing a sustainable food supply
- giving a healthy activity for people of all ages
- fostering community development and cohesiveness
- acting as an educational resource
- providing access to nature and wildlife, and acting as a resource for biodiversity
- giving open spaces for local communities
- reducing carbon emissions through avoiding the long-distance transport of food.

Local Authorities have a statutory duty to provide allotments under the provisions of the Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908. Section 23 provides that if allotment authorities “are of the opinion that there is a demand for allotments ...in the borough, district or parish the council shall provide a sufficient number of allotments to persons ...resident in the borough district or parish and desiring the same”. In determining demand an authority must take into consideration “a representation in writing by any six registered parliamentary electors or rate payers” [3].

We carried out surveys of the allotment waiting lists in England in 2009, 2010 and 2011. The 2009 survey estimated an average of 49 people waiting per 100 plots [4]. This was a large increase on the previous complete survey of allotment waiting lists in England, which was carried out in 1996 by the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners [5], and found an average of 4 people waiting per 100 plots. The 2010 survey found an average of 59 people waiting per 100 plots, and the 2011 survey found an average of 57 people waiting per 100 plots [4].

Our previous surveys have contributed to raising awareness of long waiting lists for allotments. The figures from our 2010 survey were used in a House of Commons written answer on allotment waiting lists [6], and by several local authorities in planning allotment strategies; and were also extensively reported in the national and local press. The database of the number of allotment plots was used as one of the 13 indicators in the Forum for the Future 2010 Sustainable Cities Index [7], and the total waiting list for the authorities surveyed has been used to estimate that the total number of people waiting for an allotment is over 100,000 [8] [9].

Support for adequate provision of allotments has come from a number of quarters in the past four years. In July 2009 the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published a report *Securing food supplies up to 2050: the challenges faced by the UK* [10] which concluded that “When it has been established that there is an unmet demand for allotments in a local authority area, the Government should require the local authority to publish, within three years, a plan setting out how it proposes to meet the demand.”

The Bristol Strategic Partnership has produced a document [11] analysing the potential threats to the city posed by depletion of fossil fuels, which concluded that “Bristol's food system is utterly dependent on cheap oil and gas”, and that “Key elements of a sustainable food system for Bristol” would include “increased access to growing spaces for people to be able to grow some of their own food”.

Food 2030 [12], published by Defra, included the goal that “People feel connected to their food and treat it as a source of wellbeing and enjoyment, for example through leisure activities such as growing and cooking food”, and included the action “Making land available for community food growing”, so that “more people should have the chance to grow their own food”.

Can You Dig it? [8] from the New Local Government Network discussed the benefits of allotments and unmet demand. It concluded that "A new "Dig for Victory" would be a dig for scores, if not hundreds, of victories across a range of policy areas", and that "As a society we cannot afford to waste the opportunities that this revival of interest presents. Urgent action is required."

The Government's White Paper: *Healthy Lives, Healthy People: Our strategy for public health in England* [13] highlighted local innovation and includes the commitment "We will protect and promote community ownership of green spaces and improve access to land so that people can grow their own food".

In April 2013, the Scottish Government announced plans to simplify and overhaul Scotland's allotment rules [14].

INACCURACIES IN SURVEYING ALLOTMENT WAITING LISTS

There are uncertainties around allotment waiting list figures because of a number of factors including:

- UK allotments are provided in many different ways - through (a) the principal local authorities, (b) other tiers of local government, (c) councils leasing land to independent allotment societies, (d) independent trusts, (e) public bodies other than councils, and (f) private landowners, as discussed previously [4];
- People may add their names to more than one list if several different allotment sites would be acceptable to them;
- Names may be on a list for several years and a change of mind such that a plot is no longer wanted may not be appreciated until a plot becomes available;
- Long waiting lists may deter some people from applying. There is anecdotal evidence that some councils are actively discouraging people from joining waiting lists by saying that the list is so long that there is no point in joining;
- Allotment providers may close their waiting lists once they reach a certain size.

These factors mean that any survey may overestimate or underestimate the true figure, and figures provided are therefore only rough estimates.

Survey Method

In January 2013, requests for waiting list information were submitted to the 323 city, borough and district councils and unitary authorities in England. This was done as Freedom of Information requests via the website www.WhatDoTheyKnow.com using a standard format (see box). The questions were the same as in the 2011 survey except for a minor change in wording.

The survey did not include county councils as they do not manage allotments. It must be emphasized that it did not include allotment sites managed by the 8,700 or so parish and town councils, by other public bodies, or by private allotment associations.

All but two of the 323 councils responded. The individual responses can be viewed on the website www.WhatDoTheyKnow.com, and a spreadsheet containing the responses is available online [15].

Enquiries were made to councils according to the following format:

As of January 2013, please could you tell me:

- 1) How many allotment sites are there in [Council Area, e.g. Adur] for which the Council has access to waiting list data?
- 2) What is the total number of plots on these sites?
- 3) What is the total number of people on waiting lists for these sites?
- 4) Are any of these waiting lists closed to further applications?

How many new allotment sites on council land were brought into use in 2011 and 2012?

Please give:

- a) number of new sites
- b) names of new sites
- c) total area of new land in hectares
- d) total number of new plots

Survey Results

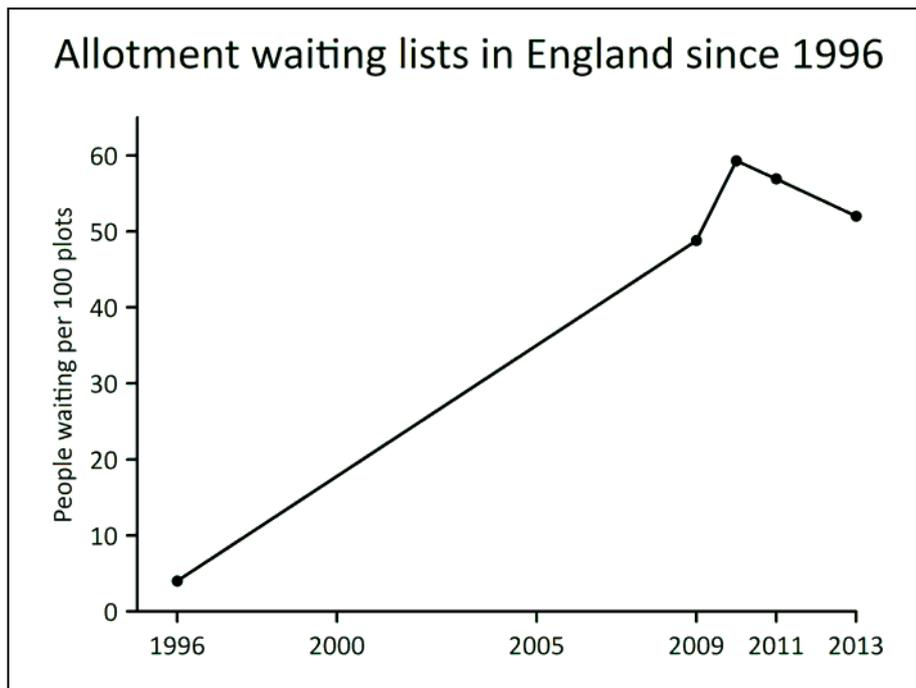
All but two of the 323 English authorities gave responses to the survey questions, and 215 of these (67%) held waiting list data. The reasons given for not holding waiting list data included (a) the councils having no allotments, (b) allotments in their area being managed by town or parish councils, and (c) all of the sites owned by the council being run by allotment societies.

The 215 councils holding waiting list data had a total of 3,558 allotment sites (averaging 17 sites per council). These 3,558 allotment sites contained a total of 152,432 plots (averaging 43 plots per site, and 709 plots per council).

Table: Allotment waiting list surveys since 1970

	Total plots in survey	Councils surveyed	Total waiting lists	People waiting per 100 plots
1970	532,964	*All	5,870	1
1977	497,793	*All	121,037	24
1996	296,923	All	12,950	4
2009	156,490	Principal	76,330	49
2010	158,796	Principal	94,124	59
2011	152,442	Principal	86,787	57
2013	152,432	Principal	78,827	52

*Numbers for 1970 & 1977 apply to England and Wales; the 1996 and 2009 to 2013 numbers apply to England only.



The total number of people waiting for these 152,432 plots was 78,827. This is an average of 52 people per 100 plots. The table (previous page) summarises previous surveys and includes the figures from this year's survey. The numbers for 1970 to 1977 are taken from the 1996 survey report [5]. The chart shows the recent data graphically.

Some of the councils indicated that people may add their names to more than one of their lists if there are a number of allotment sites that would be acceptable to them, but seem to have no system in place to assess this duplication.

There were 23 councils that reported that one or more waiting lists were closed to further applicants. Other councils had not officially closed their waiting lists, but commented that intending applicants were told the length of the list and then many decided not to proceed.

New allotment sites had been brought into use in the last two years by 51 councils (compared with 31 councils in the previous year in the 2011 survey). The total number of new sites was 65. For the 58 sites where information was supplied, the total area of the new sites was 30 hectares, and the total number of plots on these new sites was 1,950. The average plot area was 154 sq metres, which is smaller than the traditional allotment plot size of 250 sq metres. Additionally, six councils volunteered that they had provided extra plots totaling 169 through bringing into use extra plots on existing sites, or via extending existing sites. Many councils commented that they are splitting plots in half as they become vacant to help meet demand.

Discussion and Conclusions

The total number of allotment plots for which English principal councils have waiting list data was 152,432 in this survey, and the total number of people waiting for these was estimated as 78,827. This is an average of 52 people waiting per 100 plots.

This figure of 52 is less than the figure of 57 people waiting per 100 plots in the previous survey in 2011, but it is not clear whether this is a reflection of a real decline in waiting lists in view of the large uncertainties in allotment waiting lists (discussed above). In view of the considerable uncertainties around the total figures, we feel that this is best summarised as allotment waiting lists remaining high.

A fall in interest in allotments would not be surprising in view of the poor growing conditions of 2012. However there is some evidence from seed sales that the recent increase in interest in people growing their own vegetables is continuing [16].

Despite the large demand for allotments, there seems to have been little increase in supply. The number of plots in new allotment sites brought into use by local authorities in the last two years was only 1,950. This figure of 1,950 represents only about 2% of the number of people on local authority waiting lists. It could be argued that many local authorities are in breach of their statutory duty to provide sufficient allotments. Other local authorities will be unable to determine whether they are satisfying their statutory duty where they hold no waiting list data, having delegated management of allotment sites to allotment societies. The rate at which new plots have brought into use (1,950 during 2011 and 2012, i.e. 975 per year) is not an appreciable increase over the 939 new plots that were brought into use in 2010.

At a time when any funding request is likely to be closely scrutinised, a strong case can still be made for investment in allotments. Not only would such investment support the rising interest in locally grown food and in healthy eating, but it would also offer a productive activity for the unemployed, and be part of the new low carbon economy through a reduction in food miles. Money invested in allotment infrastructure (principally fencing, hardstanding, drainage and water supply) helps support the building trade and is retained within the local economy. Money spent by allotment holders on sheds, greenhouses, compost and seeds similarly aids the local and regional economies. Making public land available for local people to convert into allotment sites, to be managed as a community asset, is consistent with the Government's "Big Society" programme.

Acknowledgements

This survey was made possible by the website www.WhatDoTheyKnow.com, which enables internet requests for information to be easily routed to local authorities. This meant that the survey could be carried out with a fraction of the resources that a postal survey would have taken.

Thanks are also due to the responses from the local authorities, which often contained additional useful information.

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