

**Transition Town West Kirby
National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners**

A survey of allotment waiting lists in England

June 2009



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Margaret Campbell and Ian Campbell

Transition Town West Kirby
in conjunction with the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners

<http://www.transitiontownwestkirby.org.uk>

<http://www.nsalg.org.uk>



Summary

This is a survey of the allotment waiting lists held by the English principal local authorities. Of the 351 authorities surveyed, 346 (99%) responded, and 236 of these held waiting list data, for a total of 3,839 allotment sites. These allotment sites contained 156,490 plots and the waiting lists contained 76,330 people. This is an average of 49 people per 100 plots. There are some considerable uncertainties around these figures, which consequently may be underestimates or overestimates. These uncertainties are discussed in this report.

Despite the uncertainties, it is clear that there has been a large increase in waiting lists since the 1996 survey carried out by the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners. This survey included town and parish councils as well as principal local authorities. It gave a total of 13,000 people waiting for 297,000 plots (averaging 4 people per 100 plots).

The increase in demand for allotments reflects the rising interest in locally grown food, and healthy eating. Investment by Local Authorities and Central Government would support these aspirations and be consistent with supporting an economy in recession, offering a productive activity for the unemployed, and reducing carbon dioxide emissions through reduced food miles.



Introduction

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

- providing a sustainable food supply
- a healthy activity for all age groups
- fostering of community development and cohesiveness
- an educational resource
- providing access to nature and wildlife, and a resource for biodiversity
- open spaces for local communities
- carbon reduction through avoiding 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].

The last complete survey of allotment waiting lists in England was carried out in 1996 by the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners [4]. At that time waiting lists were relatively small, totalling around 13,000. Since then, there is anecdotal evidence of a large increase in waiting lists, with the total waiting in 2008 estimated to be 100,000 [5].

UNCERTAINTIES IN SURVEYING ALLOTMENT WAITING LISTS

UK allotments are provided in many different ways - through (a) the principal local authorities, (b) other tiers of authorities such as the 8,700 parish and town councils, (c) councils leasing land to independent allotment societies, (d) independent trusts, (e) public bodies other than councils, and (f) private landowners. This wide variation causes major difficulties for a survey of the total number of available allotments and the waiting lists for them.

This difficulty was reflected in the response rate to a survey of allotment sites in England in 2006, carried out for the Department for Communities and Local Government [6]. The DCLG advise that “The low response means that it is not possible to use this survey to estimate with confidence the numbers of allotment sites in England; and that the other findings relating to sites should be viewed with caution as they may not be representative” [7].

There are also uncertainties around allotment waiting list figures because of other factors including:

- People may add their names to more than one list if there are a number of allotment sites that would be acceptable to them.
- Names may be on a list for several years and a change in personal circumstances 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.

Survey Method

In the period December 2008 to March 2009, requests for waiting list information were submitted to the 351 city, borough and district councils and unitary authorities in England. This was done as Freedom of Information requests via the website www.WhatDoTheyKnow.com.

Councils were asked:

- 1) How many allotment sites are there in the Council area for which the council has access to waiting list data?*
- 2) In total, how many plots are on these sites ?*
- 3) In total, how many people are on these waiting lists for an allotment?*
- 4) Are any of these waiting lists closed to further applications?*
- 5) How many sites are there in total in the Council area?*

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

The analysis was carried out on the 346 responses (99%) that had been received by 1 April 2009.

The individual responses can be viewed on the website www.WhatDoTheyKnow.com, and a spreadsheet containing the responses is available at www.transitiontownwestkirby.org.uk/files/allotment_waiting_lists_09.xls

A further survey is planned for December 2009/January 2010.

Survey Results

Of the 346 responses, 110 councils indicated that they had no access to waiting list data because allotments in their area were managed by town or parish councils, by allotment societies or by other organisations.

The remaining 236 councils provided waiting list data. These councils had a total of 3,839 sites (averaging 16 sites per council).

These 3,839 allotment sites contained a total of 156,490 plots (averaging 41 plots per site, and 663 plots per council).

The total number of people waiting for these 156,490 plots was 76,330. This is an average of 49 people per 100 plots.

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 33 councils that reported that one or more waiting lists were closed to further applicants.

Discussion and Conclusions

The total number of allotment plots for which principal councils have waiting list data was 156,490 in this survey, and the total number of people waiting for these was 76,330. As discussed in the Introduction, there are considerable uncertainties around these figures.

COMPARISON WITH PREVIOUS SURVEYS

Surveys of waiting lists in England or the UK go back to 1970 at least. The table summarises previous surveys and includes the figures from this report. The figures for 1970 to 1978 are taken from the 1996 survey report [4].

Year	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

*Figures for 1970 & 1977 apply to England and Wales; 1996 and 2009 figures apply to England only.

It is clear that there has been a large increase in waiting lists for allotments since 1996 - the changes are too large to be explained by the uncertainties already discussed. This increase across England as a whole confirms the findings of the 2006 survey carried out by the London Assembly [2]. This reported that in London, over 4,300 people were waiting for allotments, an increase from 1,330 in the 1996 survey [4].

ALLOTMENTS AND THE LOCAL ECONOMY

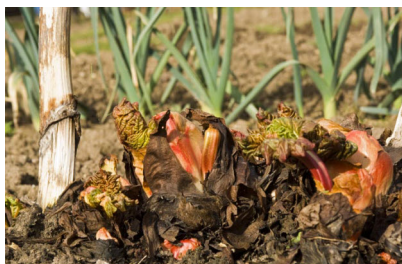
Currently there is a debate in the UK on how an economy in recession can be best supported, and there is discussion about investment in infrastructure. While investment in roads and airports may attract criticism (in view of increased carbon dioxide emissions), investment in allotments has no such problem and in fact can be expected to result in a reduction in food miles and so help meet carbon reduction targets.

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.

Acknowledgements

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

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



References

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[2] *A Lot to Lose: London's disappearing allotments*, 2006, London Assembly.

(www.london.gov.uk/assembly/reports/environment/allotments.pdf)

[3] House of Commons Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Fifth Report: APPENDIX II: MODERN ALLOTMENTS LEGISLATION.

([www.parliament.the-stationery-](http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmenvtra/560/56016.htm)

[office.co.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmenvtra/560/56016.htm](http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm199798/cmselect/cmenvtra/560/56016.htm))

[4] *English allotments survey: report of the joint survey of allotments in England*, 1997,

Crouch D for the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners and Anglia Polytechnic University.

[5] *The Guardian*, 22 March 2008, quoting Neil Dixon, Chairman of the National Allotment Gardens Trust.

[6] *Survey of Allotments, Community Gardens and City Farms* Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006.

[7] Personal correspondence from Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009.

(www.WhatDoTheyKnow.com/request/report_of_dclg_survey_of_allotme)



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Transition Town West Kirby
West Kirby, Wirral, Merseyside.
<http://www.transitiontownwestkirby.org.uk>
Email: ttwk.food@gmail.com



National Society of Allotment & Leisure Gardeners Ltd.
O'Dell House, Hunters Road, Corby,
Northants., NN17 5JE
Tel: 01536 266576, Fax: 01536 264509,
<http://www.nsalg.org.uk>
Email: natsoc@nsalg.org.uk

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