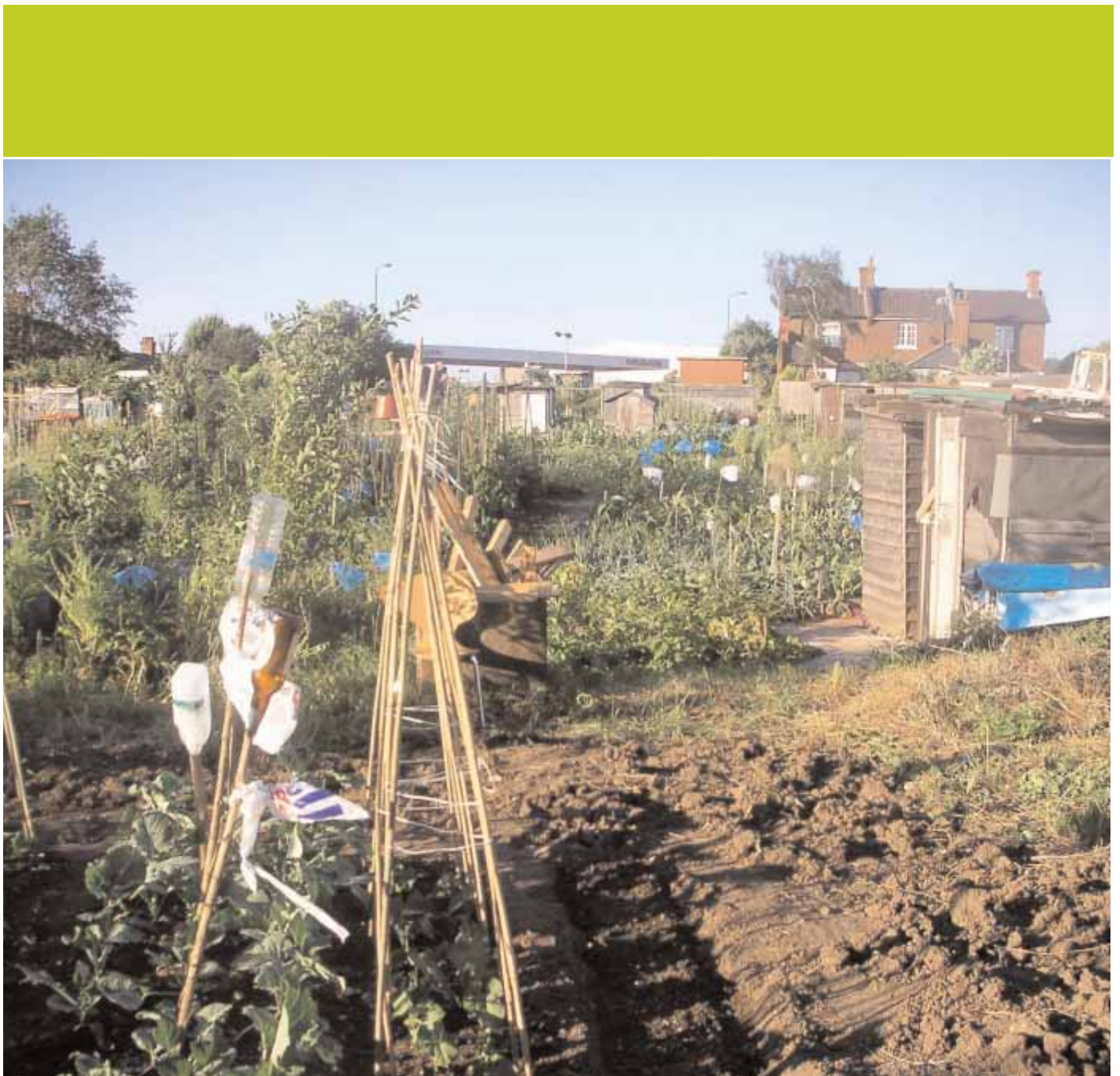


# **A Lot to Lose: London's disappearing allotments**

October 2006





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## RAPPORTEUR'S FOREWORD



Beyond the clamour of a London street there is a copse of willow, a wooden fence, the giveaway roof of a ramshackle shed. You may have walked past it, or never noticed that it was there at all. Because an allotment is, by its nature, a hidden treasure.

It is a treasure that is fast disappearing. The relentless pressure on land in the capital, the need to build at high densities, and, in some cases, neglect and disuse, mean that allotments are slowly but surely being eroded. A few cases are high profile: the patch of clayey land from which four generations have coaxed a living harvest, fallen victim to the bulldozers of the Olympic development. Others die quietly, starved of attention, labelled an eyesore, abandoned by gardeners who know closure is only a matter of time.

And yet, paradoxically, while sites close across London, demand has never been higher. The unprecedented interest in organic food has led to a renaissance in allotment gardening, particularly among women and young families. Apply in some boroughs and you will find a ten-year waiting list with 400 people ahead of you. Many popular sites have closed their waiting lists altogether.

The purpose of this report is to set out a sustainable future for London's allotments. We believe the first step to protecting allotments is to have a proper understanding of how many currently exist and where exactly they are. As a result, our report is based on the most comprehensive survey of allotment land ever carried out in the capital. Secondly, we examine the benefits – some well known, others much less obvious – that allotments bring to the individual and the wider community. We then look in detail at the particular idiosyncrasies of supply and demand in London. Finally, we turn to the legislative and regulatory protection framework and the ways in which existing allotments can most effectively be protected.

Among our key recommendations is that information must be shared more effectively among local authorities to ensure existing supply is put to good use. We also believe that boroughs that have identified unmet demand for allotments should consider using s106 agreements to compel the developers of high density housing to allocate a portion of land for use as allotments.

We would like to thank the many allotment holders, associations, and professional organisations that took the time to contribute to our inquiry. In particular, we would like to thank the Manor Gardening Society, Low Hall Farm, Kidbrooke Park Allotment Association, Creighton Avenue Allotments and Bromyard Allotments who made us so welcome on their allotment sites. We hope this report will form the basis of a new and better-informed approach to the provision of allotments in London.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Peter H. Cross". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Peter Hulme Cross AM  
Member, Environment Committee

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- Geographical information on London's allotments be made available on the Your London portal, allowing Londoners to locate the sites nearest to them. This can be done by GLA officers in the next six months. Links to this tool should be included in the allotments pages of borough websites, as well as those of the London Allotments Network, the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners, the Allotment Regeneration Initiative and the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens.
- Information on vacancies and waiting lists is shared more effectively between boroughs to meet demand and minimise the number of sites lost through disuse, particularly in outer London. For example, contact details for allotment officers in boroughs with substantial numbers of vacant plots should be made available to people on waiting lists in other parts of London. We encourage allotment officers to devise a mechanism for taking this forward in the next 12 months.
- Boroughs should, as from now, include allotment associations on their lists of statutory consultees and ensure they are informed of, and given the opportunity to respond to, any planning application that may impact on their sites.
- We will now be monitoring allotment provision in London, with a view to issuing a follow-up report in two years' time. To ensure provision is maintained, boroughs that have identified unmet demand for allotments should consider using s106 agreements to compel the developers of high density housing to allocate a portion of land for use as allotments. Where allotment land not owned by the local authority is wholly or partially threatened by sale for development, the new owner should as a matter of corporate social responsibility offer a comparable area of allotment land to compensate plot holders for the loss.



## 1. BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Definition of allotment

An allotment, at its simplest, is a piece of land, usually around 250 square metres (299 square yards), which can be rented by an individual for growing fruit and vegetables. Most, but by no means all, are owned by local authorities. The rent paid by allotment gardeners across London varies enormously across the city, but the average is around £50-£60<sup>1</sup> annually.

It is up to each borough in London to decide for itself how much of its resources to devote to allotments. If an outer London borough believes there is a demand, it has a statutory duty to provide a sufficient quantity of plots and to lease them to people living in its area. If local people feel there is a need for allotments which is not being met, they can get together a group of any six residents who are registered on the electoral roll and put their case to the local authority. For an inner London borough, the provision of allotments on demand is discretionary, not mandatory<sup>2</sup>.

### 1.2 Types of allotment

Some local authority owned sites are classified as **statutory**, which means the land was acquired or appropriated by the local authority specifically for use as allotments. These sites cannot be sold or used for other purposes without the consent of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

Before consent is given, the Secretary of State will first want to be satisfied of certain conditions. These are that:

- the allotment is either not necessary and is surplus to requirements;
- the council will give displaced plot holders adequate alternative sites, unless this is not necessary or is not practicable;
- the council has taken the number of people on the waiting list into account; and
- the council has actively promoted and publicised the availability of allotment sites and has consulted the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners.

Government guidance also requires allotment authorities to consult with plot holders before they apply for disposal. If an application goes ahead for disposal of a site in the capital, it will be dealt with by the Government Office for London.

If the application is successful, and allotment holders are displaced, the allotment authority is expected to provide one or more suitable alternative sites which should not normally be more than three-quarters of a mile from the centre of demand.

The position of **temporary** allotments is much more precarious. These are allotments situated on land which is allocated for other uses but leased or rented by an allotments authority. Temporary allotments are not protected from disposal in the same way that statutory allotments are. The Secretary of State's consent is not required for the

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<sup>1</sup> Allotments Regeneration Initiative

<sup>2</sup> London Government Act 1963, s55.4

disposal of non-statutory allotment sites, but the allotment authority will usually be required to give plot holders 12 months notice to quit before the land can be used for any other purpose.

**Privately** owned land can also be let for use as allotments. These plots have the same legal status as temporary allotment sites, but the local council has no control over them.

### 1.3 Recent developments

The last major survey of allotments was carried out on behalf of the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners in 1997<sup>3</sup>. It revealed that plots across England were disappearing at a rate of 9,400 per year. It also found that the number of people waiting for an allotment site had more than doubled since 1970. Within London, the survey identified over 36,000 allotment plots, of which almost 31,000 were in outer London, and a waiting list of 1,330.

The trends identified in the survey went on to inform a report by the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs select committee into the future of allotments<sup>4</sup>. The committee called for an overhaul of the legislation surrounding allotments, as well as the introduction of more explicit planning guidance and the automatic conferral of statutory status to any site which had been in continuous use as allotments for thirty years or more.

In its response to the select committee's report<sup>5</sup>, the Government said legislative reform was unlikely to feature in its programme of work in the near future, and pointed out that allotment gardening already benefited from greater legal protection than 'other worthwhile leisure activities'. However, it said it would work with councils to produce best practice guidance to help remedy the variation in performance between local authorities in terms of allotment provision.

This guidance, "Growing in the Community", was produced in 2001 for the Department of the Environment, Transport and Regions, the Greater London Authority and the Local Government Association. It highlights best practice from a number of London boroughs, including Bromley, Ealing, Hammersmith and Fulham and Sutton.

Current planning guidance on allotments as open space is set out in Planning Policy Guidance 17, published in 2002. The guidance indicates that open space should not be built on unless an assessment has been undertaken that has clearly shown that the open space is surplus to requirements. Allotments are included in the typology of open spaces to which the guidance applies.

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<sup>3</sup> 'English Allotments Survey: Report of the Joint Survey of Allotments in England', National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners and Anglia Polytechnic University, November 1997

<sup>4</sup> 'The Future for Allotments', Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, June 1998

<sup>5</sup> The Government's Response to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee's Report, 'The Future for Allotments', September 1998



## 2. LONDON'S ALLOTMENTS

### 2.1 Methodology

This report is based on the most complete and up to date information available on the provision of allotments in London.

We contacted all 33 London councils and asked them to tell us how many sites (both council and privately owned) existed in their borough, how many individual plots there were, and the area covered by allotment land. We also asked them about allotment provision ten years ago as a means of backing up figures contained in the English allotments survey. We asked whether the council owned sites were statutory or temporary, and how many people were on the waiting list. Finally, we asked for geographical information on the location of sites.

Where councils were unable to supply specific responses, we used information from their websites or from allotment associations in the borough.

In this chapter we analyse this data to show where London's allotments are to be found – and how that picture has changed in the last ten years.

### 2.2 How provision has changed

Over the last ten years, the number of allotments in London has decreased at three different levels.

Firstly, the number of sites has diminished. A decade ago, there were 769 sites in London. Now, data from all 33 councils suggests there are 737 – a net loss of 32 sites, or 4.2%, across the city. The majority of these were in outer London in boroughs like Bexley and Hounslow, which our map shows are fairly rich in allotments per head of population. However, provision has also decreased in inner London, with for example Lambeth losing three sites.



It is important to note that this is a net loss: we identified 39 sites that have disappeared over the last ten years while seven new sites have been established in the same period. However, these new sites tend to be considerably smaller than those they have replaced, for example a single two plot site in Tower Hamlets.

Statutory sites are among those being lost. In the twelve months to February 2006, five applications were made to the Secretary of State for disposal of sites in London – two in Croydon, two in Harrow and one in Bromley. The first four were to be sold, and the last retained as open space. All five disposals were approved.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hansard, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2006

Secondly, the number of individual plots has shrunk. Within the 20 councils for whom complete data was available, there are 20,786 plots, compared to 22,319 in 1996 – a reduction of 1,534. In percentage terms, the loss of plots (6.9%) has been significantly greater than the loss of sites. At first glance, this may appear puzzling. However, it reflects our finding that allotment sites, instead of being done away with in their entirety, are often chipped away, a handful of plots at a time. It is this insidious loss – five plots shaved off at the periphery to allow a new road to be built – that is the real threat to allotment provision in London.

The apparent disappearance of plots is especially worrying when set against a backdrop of diminishing plot sizes. In sites where there is high demand, it is increasingly common to split newly vacant plots in order to get two people off the waiting list – perhaps two new gardeners who would find a full-sized plot too much to cope with<sup>7</sup>. This suggests that the amount of allotment land which has disappeared is greater than the reduction of individual plots would suggest.

It is at this third level, land area, that the disappearance of allotments is most difficult to measure, as many boroughs were unable to provide accurate and up to date information. However, we estimate that the 1,534 plots to have disappeared over the last decade are equivalent to over 87 acres of allotment land<sup>8</sup> - equivalent to 54 football pitches. Among the boroughs for whom information was available, the largest areas were lost in Barking and Dagenham (over 13 acres) and Merton (over 15 acres).

### **2.3 Current provision**

London's 737 allotment sites are spread across 30 boroughs, with only the Corporation of London, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster having none. The largest number of sites in pure numerical terms are to be found in the outer London boroughs of Brent, Bromley and Ealing.

However, the picture varies enormously from borough to borough in terms of provision per head of population and per square metre, as demonstrated by the attached maps.

By head of population, the areas richest in allotments are Barnet, Bexley, Bromley, Ealing, Sutton, and Waltham Forest. The boroughs with the smallest numbers of allotments per head of population are, unsurprisingly, to be found in inner London, though Croydon also fares badly in this regard.

Allotment provision measured by square kilometre presents a slightly different picture, with Haringey and Lewisham, both inner London boroughs, among those with the highest concentrations of sites. Among those with a very small number of sites per square kilometre are Croydon, Hammersmith and Fulham, Havering and Newham.

### **2.4 Conclusion**

Until now, there has been a complete lack of publicly available up to date information on London's allotments. As well as being an obvious impediment to anyone looking for a plot, this oversight has significant policy implications – for any resource to be

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<sup>7</sup> This practice is followed in a number of London boroughs, for example Wandsworth and Greenwich

<sup>8</sup> Based on the loss of 1,534 plots each measuring an average of 0.057 acres

managed and preserved, it is essential that provision is accurately measured and monitored over time.

Our data addresses that problem by putting allotments literally on the map. However, having the data is not enough – it must be kept up to date and updated as changes occur. Most importantly, it must be made easily available by anyone who wants to see it.

## 2.5 Recommendation

**That geographical information on London’s allotments be made available on the Your London portal ([www.yourlondon.gov.uk](http://www.yourlondon.gov.uk)), allowing Londoners to locate the sites nearest to them. This should be done by officers at the Greater London Authority in the next six months. Links to this tool should be included in the allotments pages of borough websites, as well as those of the London Allotments Network, the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners, the Allotments Regeneration Initiative and the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens.**



### 3. THE BENEFITS OF ALLOTMENTS

#### 3.1 Social

A garden gives the body the dignity of working in its own support. It is a way of rejoining the human race – Wendell Berry

London is a city of seven million people. Living here, for many, creates a sense of isolation because the size of the city makes social networks difficult to establish. Allotment gardening is an antidote to the alienation of urban living.

One allotment association in Greenwich, whose site has 150 regular users, told us:

*Many firm friendships have originated here...the first question to any new allotment neighbour is not 'What do you do?' but 'What are you planning to grow?' and 'Would you like some spare tomato plants?'*<sup>9</sup>

A site association in Barnet, which rents plots to around 140 individuals, said:

*A site provides an additional circle of friends and a support network for those who need them...others living in flats also value having access to open space with a leisure garden to visit and work in*<sup>10</sup>.

In Ealing, one partially sighted gardener told us he had taken on a site when he had been forced to give up work eleven years ago:

*For me it's a lifeline... I come here seven days a week, otherwise I'd be sitting at home looking at my four walls. There are plenty of people around to help when I come unstuck. I get a world of benefit from coming here.*

The social benefits of an allotment need not be restricted to those who work the plots. We heard examples of sites acting as the focal point for much wider networks. One plothead described links between gardeners as "the tip of the iceberg", with family, friends and neighbours extended members of the allotment community.



The point is emphasised by an allotment society in Croydon which estimates that about a third of its thousand paid-up members are not plotheaders, but nearby residents who use the site as a social centre, supplier of plants or horticultural materials, or merely as a source of gardening knowledge. Indeed, the facilities provided on the site reflect the diversity of its appeal:

*We have a large general-purpose room with a kitchen alongside it which is used most of the time by members and local community organisations as a committee*

<sup>9</sup> Kidbrooke Park Allotment Association

<sup>10</sup> East Finchley Allotment Holders Association

*room or for social events. It is also used as a classroom for horticultural training and for teaching about renewable energy.*<sup>11</sup>

### 3.2 Health

A garden is the best alternative therapy – Germaine Greer

One of the most frequently cited benefits of allotment gardening is health improvement. The impact of activity in the great outdoors – or ‘green exercise’ – on physical and mental health is of increasing interest to medical professionals.

Research<sup>12</sup> has shown a “synergistic benefit” in adopting physical activities while being directly exposed to nature. There are important public and environmental health implications to green exercise, as a fitter and more emotionally content population costs the economy less.

The health benefits of allotment gardening were also recognised by the Government in its response to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee’s report *The Future of Allotments*.<sup>13</sup> The health argument is made all the more compelling by government predictions that over twelve million people in England will be obese by 2010<sup>14</sup>.

There is a host of anecdotal evidence to back up the suggestion that allotments have a therapeutic effect on both mental and physical health. Firstly, there is the direct benefit of physical exercise. An 81 year old plotholder told us:

*I go swimming but not to the gym - I don't need to - I exercise every day at the allotment.*<sup>15</sup>

One 360 plot site in Croydon said people recovering from strokes and from deep vein thromboses had been sent to it by GPs who believed the exercise involved was an excellent physiotherapy.<sup>16</sup> An association in Barnet said it provided essential therapeutic service for people with terminal illnesses:

*At any one time there are up to a dozen plotholders on our site who are chronically ill, often with cancer, for whom the allotments are a positive lifeline, a source of physical and spiritual refreshment that helps to keeps them going from day to day.*<sup>17</sup>

People with disabilities report significant benefits:

*As a person living with disability, the allotment has enabled me to manage my condition both physically and mentally. The allotment gives me exercise, a sense*

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<sup>11</sup> Spa Hill Allotment Society

<sup>12</sup> Green Exercise: Complementary Roles of Nature, Exercise and Diet in Physical and Emotional Well-Being and Implications for Public Health Policy, University of Essex, March 2003

<sup>13</sup> The Government’s Response to the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee’s Report, ‘The Future for Allotments’, September 1998

<sup>14</sup> Forecasting Obesity to 2010, Department of Health, August 2006

<sup>15</sup> Angelo Ghiggini, Goldsmith Close Allotments, Acton

<sup>16</sup> Spa Hill Allotment Society

<sup>17</sup> East Finchley Allotment Holders Association

*of achievement and a fulfilment and control over my life that my disability at times prevents me from getting elsewhere. The rhythm of the seasons, the sociability of the plot and the continual learning process involved in cultivation are added bonuses<sup>18</sup>.*

Secondly, there are the long-term health benefits resulting from a diet containing fresh fruit and vegetables. The Mayor's Food Strategy identifies as a priority action the expansion of individual and community growing, for example in allotments, in response to demand.<sup>19</sup> The Soil Association told us:

*The more people who understand about food production, the healthier our communities will be.<sup>20</sup>*

Indeed, allotments are a means of educating children and young people in London about food production. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds London told us it believed allotments had great potential to stimulate interest in healthy eating and the environment:

*With so many schools now reluctant to organise out of classroom trips, allotments could offer an alternative to a nature reserve. They can help explain where food comes from, encourage healthy diets and activities and introduce children to nature...children can be shown how to grow food, how to prepare and cook it and get to taste the fruit of their labours. If done properly, the impact this would have on children's health and development is easy to imagine while the benefit to London's biodiversity and general environment is incalculable.<sup>21</sup>*



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<sup>18</sup> Ann Eatwell, Grove Allotments, Dulwich

<sup>19</sup> Healthy and Sustainable Food for London, The Mayor's Food Strategy, May 2006

<sup>20</sup> Soil Association

<sup>21</sup> Royal Society for the Protection of Birds London

### 3.3 Environment

Too old to plant trees for my own gratification, I shall do it for my posterity –  
Thomas Jefferson

People are more and more concerned about the environmental impact of what they eat – and justifiably so.

Firstly, there is the distance from the field to the plate. A government report<sup>22</sup> last year put the environmental, social and economic cost of food transport at £9bn annually. Ten million tonnes of carbon dioxide were emitted in the UK in 2002 as a result of food transportation. It also accounts for a quarter of all HGV vehicle miles.

Food packaging is also a major environmental issue. It is estimated that 100,000 tonnes of plastic bags are thrown away every year. UK households produce the equivalent of 245 jumbo jets a week in packaging waste<sup>23</sup>.

The antidote provided by allotment gardening to the environmental harm caused by the transportation and packaging of food was mentioned by several allotment holders as one of the motivations for taking on a plot. One allotment officer pointed to the benefits of reducing food miles, packaging and waste:

*Even though food from the allotments is a very small proportion of the amount of food consumed, there will be a few less lorries, fewer trees turned to cardboard and a little less going into the waste stream.<sup>24</sup>*

When it comes to the contribution made by allotments on biodiversity, the picture is mixed. One study in the early nineties<sup>25</sup> found that allotments were in fact of “little importance” to wildlife habitat creation in urban areas. However, the range of species that thrive on allotment sites suggests that they may indeed have a role to play in promoting biodiversity. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds London told us allotments were “vital” in this regard:

*House sparrows and starlings are among the birds disappearing from our streets but it's noticeable from our annual Big Garden/Big Schools' birdwatch campaigns that areas around allotments fare much better...to some an untended plot may be an eyesore but these wild areas are home to a wide range of birds and insects. Bramble and ivy provide both food and shelter all year round and are favoured by wrens, robins, blackbirds and song thrushes.<sup>26</sup>*

This argument is supported by the findings of plotholders themselves. An allotment association in Barnet said its site teemed with small mammals, bird, amphibian and insect life:

*Over the last two years, for example, woodpigeons are no longer as great a problem to those of us growing brassicas as a female sparrowhawk regularly hunts on the site. We have set aside areas to encourage insects and other wild-*

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<sup>22</sup> The Validity of Food Miles as an Indicator of Sustainable Development, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, July 2005

<sup>23</sup> Waste Online ([www.wasteonline.org.uk](http://www.wasteonline.org.uk))

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Cole, Allotments Manager, Ealing Council

<sup>25</sup> Elkin, T, 'Chapter 4: Green Space and Wildlife', in Reviving the City', Friends of the Earth, 1991

<sup>26</sup> Royal Society for the Protection of Birds London

*life to make their home on the site. For many of us watching the wild-life on the site contributes as much to our enjoyment of our allotment as the rewards of our home grown produce.<sup>27</sup>*

### 3.4 Financial

Your first job is to prepare the soil. The best tool for this is your neighbour's garden tiller. If your neighbour does not own a garden tiller, suggest that he buy one – Dave Barry

The original purpose of allotments, encapsulated in the General Inclosure Act 1845, was to provide a source of fresh fruit and vegetables for the “landless poor”. Even now, the financial advantages of allotment gardening remain significant, and were mentioned by a number of ploholders as one of the biggest benefits:

*The advantages of allotments: especially at my age, it is financial. My wife and I are vegetarian - we don't spend any money on vegetables. We have free vegetables and fruit all year round.<sup>28</sup>*

*Most of us could not afford to buy organic yellow vine-ripened tomatoes, even if the local supermarket stocked them, which it doesn't. But we can buy a packet of seed from a small specialist mail order business, and have enough to give our friends as well.<sup>29</sup>*

Of course, the economic viability of the plot will also vary depending on the rent charged at each site. Annual plot rents across London vary from £10 to £140, and the picture is further complicated by the discounts offered by many sites to certain groups. However, the average across London is probably in the range of £50-60<sup>30</sup>.

A number of ploholders warned the cost benefits should not be exaggerated. One association in East Finchley said the financial savings were in fact “probably pretty modest”:

*It is often said that the cost of having an allotment – including rent, seeds, fertiliser etc – is of the same order as the cost of the produce if bought from a shop. But the quality, flavour and freshness of most allotment produce is far superior.<sup>31</sup>*

Another ploholder, in Hillingdon, described the return from an allotment in terms of economics as “minimal in the beginning”, but said that as the success rate improves there is the potential for major savings on the weekly shopping bill.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> East Barnet Allotments Association

<sup>28</sup> Angelo Ghiggini, Goldsmith Close Allotments, Acton

<sup>29</sup> Candace Gillies-Wright, Lamlash Street Allotment Association

<sup>30</sup> Figures from the Allotments Regeneration Initiative

<sup>31</sup> East Finchley Allotment Holders Association

<sup>32</sup> Samuel K Stanley, Nursery Lane Allotments, Hillingdon



### 3.5 Community

Laying out grounds may be considered a liberal art, in some sort like poetry and painting – William Wordsworth

The benefits of the allotment site do not stop at the site gates. The evidence we received from sites around London, supported by what we witnessed on our visits to sites, was that allotments have strong links with the local community from which both sides benefit.

Some sites with vacancies encourage disabled groups, physically and mentally, to take on plots.

One self-managed site in Bromley lets two plots to a teacher from a local special needs school for work with her students. It also holds regular open days to help foster links with the local community:

*We provide a distinctive local event which builds local identity and also host other events. The fact of running a group with real responsibilities cutting across generational ethnic, social class, economic and social boundaries in a transparent, constitutional and democratic way demonstrates the possibility of building real civic values in today's diverse urban environment. We also invite classes from local schools onto the site showing children where vegetables actually come from. A well functioning allotment site can also be a reliably peopled 'public space', adding considerably to the overall safety of an area.<sup>33</sup>*

Links to schools and local children are an important part of many allotment sites.

The secretary of a small site in Camberwell, which lets a nearby primary school use a plot with their gardening teacher, said relationships between allotment associations and local schools should become the norm:



*Unsurprisingly, city children commonly find the allotments experience hugely engaging - many urban kids have little idea about how things grow, or how you go about cultivating food plants, and this is not something it is easy to get a good sense of through classroom based study. A good case can be made that all children should have the opportunity to share an allotment as part of their education.*

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<sup>33</sup> Kent House Leisure Gardens Association

This site has ambitious plans to expand its role in the community by expanding its educational activities, for example by setting up a demonstration apiary and butterfly habitat:

*We want to build on the allotment as a context for engaging with the environment, and evolve the site into a kind of environmental project space for the local community.*<sup>34</sup>

### **3.6 Diversity**

Show me your garden and I shall tell you what you are – Alfred Austin

Far from the popular image of allotments as dominated by working class white males, often retired, London's allotments are a case study in diversity.

More and more allotment holders are women. A recent survey in a small number of West London boroughs put the proportion of women as high as 41%, with women particularly well represented among younger ploholders.<sup>35</sup>

Sites told us of members from every corner of the globe – a fitting reflection of London's status as one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world.

*We have already benefited socially from the inclusion of a diverse mix of nationalities. Currently our membership includes around 40% of non-British origin, predominantly southern European but including a number of African origin. Were it not for these 'incomers', many of whom live outside Barnet borough, we would be struggling much more than we are.*<sup>36</sup>

The majority of sites who contributed to our inquiry cited the diversity of ploholders as one of the main attractions of allotment gardening:

*The diversity of our community is a wonderful benefit. We all profit by the regular exchange of horticultural practice, plants, recipes and philosophies between all members of this community.*<sup>37</sup>

#### **CASE STUDY: LOW HALL FARM**

*Low Hall Farm, with 220 well-worked plots, is the biggest site in Waltham Forest and one of the most ethnically diverse. One Caribbean gardener said he had discovered relatives from his home island on the site. Amongst the vegetables flourishing at Low Hall Farm are christophene (a firm pear-shaped squash from the Caribbean) Japanese spring onions and Eastern European specialities. In another corner of the site, a group of Turkish women of all ages prepare dough and bake traditional unleavened bread on an open fire. Although this is a place where different groups prosper, there is a strong overarching sense of community reinforced by regular social outings and, of course, the passion of a shared interest.*

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<sup>34</sup> Grove Park Allotments, Camberwell

<sup>35</sup> Women (re)construct the plot: the regen(d)eration of urban food growing, Susan Buckingham, 2002

<sup>36</sup> Brook Farm Allotment and Horticultural Society

<sup>37</sup> East Barnet Allotments Association

Perhaps the most valuable benefit allotments bring a community is to bring together people with a shared interest – even those whose paths might never normally cross. One site observed:

*I cannot think of anywhere else in London you will see a merchant banker chatting about wine with a (Portuguese) dustman, or the owner of a large house on Blackheath swapping plants with another allotment member from the Ferrier Estate.<sup>38</sup>*

### 3.7 Conclusion

The case for maintaining, promoting and protecting allotments is a strong one, on public health and environmental grounds as well a means of enhancing community cohesion.

Any policy decision on the future of allotments must have full regard to the very considerable benefits they bring to the individual and the wider community.



<sup>38</sup> Kidbrooke Park Allotment Association

## 4. SUPPLY AND DEMAND FOR ALLOTMENTS

In this chapter we examine the reasons for lengthening waiting lists and the impact of current levels of demand on allotment provision in London. We suggest ways of tackling the geographical mismatch between supply and demand in inner and outer London and, potentially, increasing supply.

### 4.1 The impact of increasing demand

There are now over 4,300 people waiting for allotments across the city – 3,000 more than a decade ago<sup>39</sup>.

But for many of these people, the prospects of ever getting their own plot are bleak. Some boroughs tell prospective plotters they face a ten year wait<sup>40</sup>. The London Allotments Network, which receives three or four emails every week from allotment seekers, says the number of people in inner London who have “very little realistic chance of ever getting one” is an issue of great concern<sup>41</sup>.

Some sites have been forced to restrict allotment allocation to those living close to the site. One site in Bromley said it had had to change its policy as a result of increasing demand, which had led to a waiting list of 25 people:

*We have recently introduced a policy to favour people from the immediate area and we no longer make active efforts to look for new members. We estimate that most people on the list within our catchment area will get a plot within a year, although those outside are unlikely ever to get a plot.*<sup>42</sup>

A site in Croydon, with a waiting list of over 100 people, has adopted a similar approach:

*We have been forced to restrict new lettings to those who live within 2km of the site although in practice we cannot see that anyone who lives more than 1km away will get a plot here in the next year.*<sup>43</sup>

Other sites have attempted to cope with rising demand by reducing the size of plots for new members, restricting the maximum plottings per household, and terminating the contracts of members who are not using their plots regularly and productively.

It is likely that sites will have to continue to find ways of meeting high demand, especially in areas earmarked for high density housing developments. This was a fear expressed by a site we visited in Acton, which already had a waiting list of over 60. Over 2,000 new residents were expected to come to the area as a result of new development, of which 500 would be living directly across the road. Similarly, a site at Mudchute points to the likely impact of skyscraper blocks on the site of the old London Arena and South Quay plaza – hundreds of apartments, none with gardens.

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<sup>39</sup> There were 1,330 people waiting for allotments in London in 1997, according to the English Allotments Survey: Report of the Joint Survey of Allotments in England, National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners and Anglia Polytechnic University, November 1997

<sup>40</sup> Camden Council, <http://www.camden.gov.uk>

<sup>41</sup> London Allotments Network

<sup>42</sup> Kent House Leisure Gardens Association

<sup>43</sup> Spa Hill Allotment Society

## 4.2 Reasons for lengthening waiting lists

To explain this explosion in demand, some sites suggest that a large number of people who might not have at one time even considered allotment gardening are now looking for plots. The so-called embourgeoisement of allotments, fuelled by lifestyle articles in the Sunday supplements and a renewed interest in healthy eating and organic produce, has brought in a new generation of allotment holders. Many of them are women and young families:

*Few ploholders are now old men in cloth caps and muddy boots. Many of our members are from ethnic minorities and an increasing number are women. We are also seeing an increasing number of young families coming on site, often to grow organically.<sup>44</sup>*

*Almost half of applicants for plots are now women with young children who want to grow their own vegetables because of declining trust in the supermarket supplied variety and or the high premiums charged for organic produce. People are also starting to worry about food miles.<sup>45</sup>*

However other factors do come into play. One is that it can be difficult to get rid of gardeners who are for whatever reason neglecting their plot, and so people on the waiting list are forced to wait even longer. Or, when the plot is eventually liberated, it may be in such a bad state that new tenants are unwilling to take it on.

It is also possible that people join already lengthy waiting lists simply because they are unaware of the existence of alternative sites, some of which may have vacancies. The availability of geographical data on the location of sites, as recommended above, will go some way to addressing this problem. However, if every Londoner who wants a plot to be able to get one in a reasonable time, a fundamental issue needs to be addressed - the geographical disparity of supply and demand.

## 4.3 Mismatch between supply and demand

One clear conclusion of our research is that demand for allotments in London is geographically completely out of step with where the vacancies are.

As the London Allotments Network put it:

*There are still some sites round the perimeter of Greater London with vacant plots which they are desperate to let. The unfortunates who live in the middle will have to believe in reincarnation because waiting lists there are very long indeed.<sup>46</sup>*

Our research confirms that waiting lists in inner London are indeed formidable. Wandsworth alone has over 820 people on its list, Camden over 580, Lewisham 420. Wandsworth has an up to date waiting list on its website, broken down by site, and tells potential applicants they can expect a wait of several years. Camden's website warns the

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<sup>44</sup> East Finchley Allotment Holders Association

<sup>45</sup> Spa Hill Allotment Society

<sup>46</sup> London Allotments Network

waiting time is over ten years, and actively points people towards sites in neighbouring Barnet and Brent. Lewisham states estimated waiting times, as at last year, for each of its sites, ranging from one month to six and a half years. It directs people towards non council-owned sites, such as a number owned by National Rail, which it suggests may have shorter waiting lists.

In outer London, the picture is much more mixed. There are boroughs in outer London with substantial waiting lists, for example Ealing (400), Hounslow (340) and Merton (293). However, closer examination reveals that in some outer London boroughs there are short waiting lists for some sites – generally those closest to central London – and large numbers of vacancies in others. For example in Waltham Forest, sites in the south of the borough are full, while in those in the north have vacancies. We heard of a similar trend when we visited a popular site on the west side of Haringey, which had a waiting list of 60, while sites in the east of the borough had unused land. The reason for this was not known, although it was suggested that some of the sites had fallen into a cycle of neglect and vandalism which made them unattractive to potential gardeners. In some cases, we heard that there was no one individual to deal with requests from potential plotters. Clearly, without someone to receive and coordinate such requests, the opportunity to fill long-standing vacancies will be squandered.

The logical solution is to match up those who are willing to travel from inner London with vacancies in the outer boroughs. But to do this, three major problems must be overcome. The first is that people do not know, and it is not easy to find out, where the sites are. Allotments are by nature hidden places, and someone may be unaware of a site twenty minutes' walk or a ten minute bus ride away in the next borough. We believe this can be overcome at least to some extent by the publication of our data, as recommended above.



The second difficulty is lack of coordination. Some boroughs have a policy of not accepting applications from out of borough, though non-council owned sites tend to be more flexible. But more importantly there is no formal mechanism for information about supply and demand to be shared.

The third is that, of course, not everyone will be willing to travel. Taking on a plot some distance away adds to the

already considerable commitment of time and energy needed to maintain a piece of land. One gardener who has a plot near the Elephant and Castle said those working long hours were unlikely to want to spend extra time travelling to and from a site:

*I only have this plot because it's so close to home – I'm not going to travel an hour by bus down to Dulwich in my wellies to pick my lettuce for Saturday lunch.<sup>47</sup>*

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<sup>47</sup> Candace Gillies-Wright, Lamlash Street Allotment Association

But for those who might be willing to travel, one very simple way of putting them in touch with vacant plots is to publicise the outer London boroughs which have a large number of plots to let, and are happy to do so to out of borough applicants. This is already being done on an ad-hoc basis by individual boroughs such as Camden, mentioned above. However, if contact details for allotment officers in these boroughs were routinely made available to people seeking plots in London, it would at least give them the option of taking on a plot further from home right away, instead of waiting a decade or more for one a few streets away. Contact details of these allotment officers or could be published on the websites of boroughs with high demand for allotments, as well as those of the London Allotments Network, the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners, the Allotment Regeneration Initiative and the Your London portal mentioned above. Allotment officers should also be in a position to provide this information in response to phone inquiries.

Ultimately, however, the most effective way to match demand with supply is to build on existing informal networks between boroughs to provide a mechanism through which information about vacancies can be shared. The London Allotment Officers Group, which meets periodically to discuss shared issues, would be the logical starting point for such a process.

There is of course scope for sites with a large number of vacancies to do more to attract gardeners from other parts of the city. The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens suggests the provision of toilets, secure storage and shelters to make long distance gardening a viable option.<sup>48</sup> An example of this working in practice was the grant paid by the Allotment Regeneration Initiative to an association in outer London, Harrow in Leaf. The money paid for promotion, disabled facilities, multicultural signage, and increased security, all of which were designed to attract a greater number of gardeners from inner London.

#### **4.4 Increasing supply**

The question of allotment size is a controversial one. Particularly in inner London, where demand is highest, it is increasingly common for newly vacant plots to be split in half so that two gardeners can share the land. Smaller pieces of land are also seen as more manageable for new gardeners who may lack the expertise needed to take on a full plot, or those whose work or family commitments prevent them from spending the time required.

The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens said there may be benefits to this approach in terms of meeting demand, and that the arrangement to share plots is often made informally between plotheholders.<sup>49</sup>

However, there is opposition to the idea of preventing those are able and willing to take on larger plots from doing so. The National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners said smaller plots were “better than nothing”:

*However we are keen to retain the standard 10 rod plot [the traditional size of an allotment plot, equivalent to around 250 square metres] as this is the size*

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<sup>48</sup> The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens

<sup>49</sup> The Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens

*needed to produce enough fruit and vegetables for a family for most of the year.<sup>50</sup>*

We believe that in areas with long waiting lists, boroughs should consider subdividing plots in order to accommodate demand and to meet the needs of the increasing number of gardeners who are unable for whatever reason to take on larger pieces of land. The provision of smaller plots may also address the problem of land going to waste as a result of being taken on by someone without the experience to manage it.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

A general shortage of allotment provision in London is significantly exacerbated by the geographical mismatch in supply and demand. Unless a way is found to match potential ploholders with existing vacancies, thousands of people living in inner London will miss out on the substantial benefits of allotment gardening while plots in outer London fall into disuse and risk being lost all together.

#### **4.6 Recommendation**

**That information on vacancies and waiting lists is shared more effectively between boroughs to meet demand and minimise the number of sites lost through disuse, particularly in outer London. For example, contact details for allotment officers in boroughs with substantial numbers of vacant plots should be made available to people on waiting lists in other parts of London. We encourage allotment officers to devise a mechanism for taking this forward in the next 12 months.**



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<sup>50</sup> National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners



## 5. THREATS AND PROTECTION

Our survey showed that there has been a net loss of 32 allotment sites across London over the last ten years. However, for every site that has vanished, dozens more live under threat. This chapter examines the risks faced by London's allotments and recommends how they might best be protected.

### 5.1 Threats facing allotments

One high profile example of an allotment under threat is Manor Gardens in Newham, where 83 plots are tucked at the end of a narrow lane between a bus garage and a food factory.

#### ***CASE STUDY: MANOR GARDENS***

*When London won the right to host the 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games, the city exploded in celebration. But in a corner of Newham, right at the heart of the proposed development, joy was quickly overcome by dismay – because an allotments site dating back over 100 years lies right in the path of the bulldozers.*



*For the close-knit community at Manor Gardens, the allotments are an extended family, a social club and for some, a lifeline. The people are connected to the land in a way that goes much deeper than a blade in the soil. Many expressed disbelief that the years they had invested in making their plots viable were to be sacrificed for the sake of a footpath needed for a four week sporting event.*

*The London Development Agency, which is responsible for assembling the land needed for the Games, has said it will be impossible for the allotments to remain. It has identified an alternative site in Waltham Forest which, subject to planning permission, ploholders can use until after the Games. Post 2012, they will then have the option of returning to a site closer to the original plots.*

*The fight is now on to save the site. Ploholders have produced a visionary alternative plan in which the allotments become an outdoors restaurant and centre for cultural exchange – a resource that reinforces the ethos of the Games, rather than one that stands in its way.*

But all over London, where the pressure for land is intense, the threat of development hangs over allotment sites, especially those that are not well worked. The Soil Association confirmed:

*Our experience has been that the most common threat to allotments is the value of land for developers or where allotments have become derelict. There needs to be a strategic decision at government level that will enable local authorities to protect their allotments and resources to help promote them.<sup>51</sup>*

Statutory sites benefit from a degree of protection against the threat of development, as ministerial consent, dependent on a list of strict conditions, is needed for disposal.

However, the future of non-statutory sites is, to a certain extent, at the vagaries of the local land market. As a result these sites are often characterised by uncertainty and a sense of helplessness:

*Land around the Elephant and Castle is increasingly valuable and Southwark council has other priorities it would seem. Our plots have been threatened with development before and legally we have very little defence on our site if they chose to reclaim it.<sup>52</sup>*

Another site, in Tower Hamlets, adds:

*We have very few needs apart from protection of our land. This is the single most important factor for our survival. Thankfully, thanks to the strong support of our local authority, our existence has been protected until now. But it is always a big worry in view of ever-increasing land prices in inner city areas, that our future is not secure. This is the most important help we would seek - formal, legally binding protection of our land, and others like it, from the risk of property development.<sup>53</sup>*

## **5.2 Protection of allotments**

There is substantial confusion about the designation of sites and the protection they enjoy, which is partly due to the labyrinthine nature of allotments legislation formulated through the years. There is no doubt that the existing framework is in need of reform, at the very least to provide clarity, and potentially to set out the conditions under which a temporary site could attain statutory status. However, we would resist calls for temporary sites to gain statutory protection automatically after a certain number of years as to do so would inevitably discourage councils and other landowners from making land available for allotment use even on a temporary basis.

However, we believe there is scope to improve the protection given to allotments without recourse to legislative reform.

Firstly, allotment sites should be made aware of planning applications that are likely to impact on their land so that they are in a better position to make their case. At the moment this rarely happens and it is left to allotment associations to inform themselves

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<sup>51</sup> Soil Association

<sup>52</sup> Lamlash Street Allotment Association

<sup>53</sup> Cable Street Community Gardens

about any proposed development, which one association describes as “complex and time-consuming”<sup>54</sup>.

Secondly, greater use should be made of powers boroughs already possess to increase supply. Boroughs that have identified unmet demand for allotments should consider using s106 agreements<sup>55</sup> to compel the developers of high density housing to allocate a portion of land for use as allotments.

Where allotment land not owned by the local authority is wholly or partially threatened by sale for development, the new owner should as a matter of corporate social responsibility offer a comparable area of allotment land to compensate plotters for the loss.

We believe there may be scope for allotment provision on an interim basis on brownfield land within the city. A recent Environment Committee report highlighted the potential of brownfield sites awaiting development to be used as a community resource, ranging from informal recreational use to the hosting of one-off events.<sup>56</sup> Not all brownfield land would be suitable for allotment use because of contamination or other environmental safety issues, or because the period for which it is available would be too short to make cultivation viable. However, we believe the London Development Agency should carry out an appraisal into potential short term uses, including allotment provision, of brownfield land.

Ultimately, the most important single thing allotment sites can do to protect their future is to ensure their occupancy rates are high. There is no set percentage below which sites are considered underused and ripe for disposal, but in the course of our research we heard of ‘acceptable’ occupancy levels ranging from 40% to 60%. Recommendations made in chapter four above relating to the matching up of demand and supply should make it likelier that plots will be properly worked and therefore protected, but the onus is on allotment officers and associations to publicise their sites as far as possible through word of mouth and the local media.

Now that up to date information is available on allotment provision in London, it can be measured on an ongoing basis to ensure this precious resource is protected over time. We intend to review provision in London in two years’ time.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

Over and above the legislative safeguards surrounding statutory sites, there is a need for temporary sites to be given greater protection against total or partial loss in order to stem the disappearance of sites – and individual plots – across London.

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<sup>54</sup> West Ham Allotment Association

<sup>55</sup> Section 106 of the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act allows local authorities to enter into agreements with those applying for planning permission, which restricts either the development or use of the land, or requires some specified operations or activities to be carried out. It can also be used to secure a sum of money to be paid to the authority for some specified purpose.

<sup>56</sup> Dereliction of duty? A report on brownfield development in London, London Assembly Environment Committee, November 2005

## 5.4 Recommendations

**We will now be monitoring allotment provision in London, with a view to issuing a follow-up report in two years' time.**

**To ensure provision is maintained, boroughs should, as from now, include allotment associations on their lists of consultees and ensure they are informed of, and given the opportunity to respond to, any planning application that may impact on their sites.**

**Boroughs that have identified unmet demand for allotments should consider using s106 agreements to compel the developers of high density housing to allocate a portion of land for use as allotments. Where allotment land not owned by the local authority is wholly or partially threatened by sale for development, the new owner should as a matter of corporate social responsibility offer a comparable area of allotment land to compensate plot holders for the loss.**



## APPENDIX ONE: ALLOTMENT SITES BY BOROUGH

<b>Borough</b>	<b>Number of sites</b>
Barking and Dagenham	15
Barnet	50
Bexley	37
Bromley	52
Brent	23
Camden	9
Corporation of London	0
Croydon	17
Ealing	59
Enfield	36
Greenwich	18
Hackney	9
Hammersmith and Fulham	2
Haringey	25
Harrow	32
Havering	26
Hillingdon	37
Hounslow	30
Islington	4
Kensington and Chelsea	0
Kingston upon Thames	22
Lambeth	11
Lewisham	36
Merton	19
Newham	8
Redbridge	25
Richmond upon Thames	25
Southwark	19
Sutton	37
Tower Hamlets	7
Waltham Forest	37
Wandsworth	10
Westminster	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>737</b>

## **APPENDIX TWO: EVIDENCE**

Written evidence was received from:

Angelo Ghiggini, Goldsmith Close Allotments  
Ann Eatwell, Grove Allotments, Dulwich  
Ann Fox  
Ann Frearson  
Annabelle Fowler  
Allotments Regeneration Initiative  
Belmont Allotment Association  
Bill Geddes  
Brian Young, Cooks Farm Allotments and Garden Society  
British Sikh Women's Organisation  
Bromley Ward Association for Allotments  
Brook Farm Allotment and Horticultural Society  
Cable Street Community Gardens  
Dawn Hutcheon, Leyes Road Allotments  
Department for Communities and Local Government  
Downham Nutrition Partnership  
East Barnet Allotments Association  
East Finchley Allotment Holders Association  
Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens  
Federation of Hounslow Allotment Associations  
Grant Smith  
Grove Park Allotments, Camberwell  
Harrow in Leaf  
Hendon Grove Allotments  
Hornchurch and District Allotments and Gardening Society  
Judith Hanna  
Kent House Leisure Gardens Association  
Kidbrooke Park Allotment Association  
Lamlash Street Allotment Association  
Leytonstone Allotment Holders Association  
London Food Link  
National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners  
Norman Verth  
Norwood Green Horticultural Society  
P Scopes  
Paula Alderson  
Paddock Allotments, Merton  
Richard Phillips  
Roger King and Family  
Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals  
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds London  
Samuel Stanley  
Sheila Schubert, Greenwich Council  
Soil Association  
Spa Hill Allotment Society  
Stephen Cole, Ealing Council  
St Mary's Allotment Association  
Stuart and Paula Lawrence  
Theresa Giffard  
Tom Douglas, Bromley Allotments and Leisure Gardens Federation  
Women's Environmental Network

**APPENDIX 3 – Maps**

## **APPENDIX FOUR: ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

Darren Johnson, Chair	Green
Angie Bray	Conservative
Roger Evans	Conservative
Peter Hulme Cross	One London
Murad Qureshi, Deputy Chair	Labour
Valerie Shawcross	Labour
Mike Tuffrey	Liberal Democrat

Terms of reference:

To investigate the provision of allotments across the capital and issues relating to:

- the social and economic benefits of allotments;
- the reasons for long waiting lists;
- best practice designed to protect and make optimum use of existing allotments
- legislation and regulation affecting the provision, ownership and management of plots in London

Contact:

Kerry Lorimer  
Scrutiny Manager  
[kerry.lorimer@london.gov.uk](mailto:kerry.lorimer@london.gov.uk)  
020 7983 6540



## **APPENDIX FIVE: PRINCIPLES OF LONDON ASSEMBLY SCRUTINY**

### **An aim for action**

An Assembly scrutiny is not an end in itself. It aims for action to achieve improvement.

### **Independence**

An Assembly scrutiny is conducted with objectivity; nothing should be done that could impair the independence of the process.

### **Holding the Mayor to account**

The Assembly rigorously examines all aspects of the Mayor's strategies.

### **Inclusiveness**

An Assembly scrutiny consults widely, having regard to issues of timeliness and cost.

### **Constructiveness**

The Assembly conducts its scrutinies and investigations in a positive manner, recognising the need to work with stakeholders and the Mayor to achieve improvement.

### **Value for money**

When conducting a scrutiny the Assembly is conscious of the need to spend public money effectively.

## APPENDIX SIX: ORDERS AND TRANSLATIONS

### **How to Order**

For further information on this report or to order a copy, please contact Kerry Lorimer, Scrutiny Manager, on 020 7983 6540 or email [Kerry.Lorimer@london.gov.uk](mailto:Kerry.Lorimer@london.gov.uk)

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