

**Walsall Council  
Greenspace Services  
Allotments Strategy (Draft)  
2007–2012**

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## ***Foreword***

**Tim Challans**

**Assistant Director, Leisure, Culture and Lifelong Learning**

Walsall council provides some 1434 allotment plots across 36 sites in the borough managed and maintained by the Greenspaces Service. It is an asset that the Borough residents can be justifiably proud of and has played an important role in defining the character of the Borough.

These valuable allotment sites offer the users a facility where they can grow their own vegetables and fruit as well as flowers, the sites are of vital importance in providing opportunities where people can, not only '*grow their own*' but also provide a place where they can relax, contemplate and enjoy the fresh air, and participate in a more active and healthier lifestyle. Allotments contribute greatly to the enrichment and quality of life of the community who live and work in the Borough.

We have been keen to build on this strong foundation and move the Service even further forward. This strategy identifies within its consultation section, the need to further improve our allotment sites through a series of improved paths and accessibility, increased security in the form of improved fencing and gates, and increased facilities such as toilet blocks.

Allotments are a valuable green asset, not only in providing a wide range of benefits to the community and the environment, they are also highly beneficial to our wildlife

We have learnt a great deal about what really matters to the community and the strategy is a demonstration of our commitment to provide a responsive service, which reflects the needs, interests and wishes of 'Walsall's people'.

**Councillor Louise Harrison**  
**Portfolio holder, Leisure and Culture**

Walsall Council has made a commitment to become an 'Excellent' Authority by 2008 and our parks, countryside sites and Greenspaces which includes our many allotment sites are making a big contribution to make Walsall an attractive place to live, play & work.

The Government is asking us to make our towns and cities cleaner, greener and safer and the residents of Walsall want this too. We are living in increasingly stressed times and need places where we can relax, walk, or just go to and sit and chat with friends. We feel that Walsall's allotments satisfy the government's targets as well as meeting our own local vision of making Walsall a greener, cleaner area.

People's increased awareness of health issues such as healthy eating and regular exercise are more evident in allotment gardening than any other recreation. Fruit and vegetable eating, walking, social interaction are a good example of a healthy community, both mentally and physically.

I am sure that this strategy will help us to look at ways to build on our strengths and provide a way forward in facing our challenges. Much has been achieved already and I feel that we now have a workable document that will act as a guide to enable us to improve the quality of our allotment sites and the delivery of better services.

## 1.0 Introduction

**1.1** Allotment gardening provides a wide range of benefits to individuals; communities and the wider environment.

They are primarily important for the production good quality, fresh and low cost food, but they also provide a valuable recreational opportunity to individuals and groups, providing healthy physical activity and social interaction – a way of life for many people, part of the urban culture. Allotments are a distinctive component of the borough's green spaces, significant to wildlife and to the urban landscape.

**1.2** The high level of response shown by allotment holders during consultation over this strategy shows that allotment gardening is well valued and can be distinctive part of Walsall's Local Agenda 21.

**1.3** Many of Walsall's allotment sites are well utilised and flourishing. However, most of Walsall's allotment sites are in a poor state, and some sites are underused and in decline, or unusable as allotments.

**1.4** Allotments have evolved through a history of social and economic change which has been accompanied by a succession of legislation known as the Allotment Acts, is in some ways recognised as being outdated but it will still remain relevant to allotment administration and provision until it is revised.

**1.5** Most recent guidance is contained in 'Growing in the Community – A good practice guide for the management of allotments' (published by the LGA publication for the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions; the Greater London Authority; the Local Government Association; and the Shell Better Britain Campaign) which is the basis of this strategy

**1.6** Walsall Council will continue to provide and promote allotments because:

- It has a statutory duty to do so
- Allotment gardening makes a valuable contribution to the borough's sustainability by providing economic, health, social, and environmental benefits
- Allotments are widely recognised as important leisure and recreational facilities
- The current adopted Greenspaces strategy states that :-

*'Allotments provide spaces for local communities to grow their own food. They provide fresh and healthy food and many non-market benefits, such as relaxation, enjoyment and recreation all with health benefits.*

*Working an allotment offers healthy physical recreation for all people. It is increasingly being recognised for its therapeutic value.'*

and commits that 'The council and its partners will continue to promote the health benefits of allotments.'

- The unitary development plan (UDP) Policy LC4: Allotment Gardens, proposes that:-

*‘Proposals involving the loss of allotment gardens will not be permitted unless it is demonstrated that this would not result in unmet demand for allotments within reasonable walking distance. The importance of some allotment sites for nature conservation and the general amenity of adjacent residents will also be taken into account. The provision of additional allotment sites will be encouraged in areas where there is increasing demand.*

*8.23 The Council has a statutory obligation to retain allotments designated under the Allotments Acts. However, patterns of demand have changed so that some allotments are underused whilst others have waiting lists. Allotments, in addition to their primary function, often have wildlife and general amenity value and this will be taken into account when evaluating development proposals’.*

These benefits can and should be increased significantly over the period of the strategy. Fundamental to this is to increase the number of people using allotments. This strategy aims to maximise the number of people using allotments.

## **2.0 Purpose of Strategy**

**2.1** The Allotment Strategy is a live document intended for regular review and has been drafted for the Council’s allotments managed by Neighbourhood Services Committee (ie directly managed sites and sites managed by allotment local management associations, but not for privately managed allotments).

The strategy will:

- Clarify the status of, and council commitment to allotments
- Set standards for the provision of allotments in Walsall;
- Increase the uptake of allotments;
- Improve the standard of service provision;
- Increase the benefits derived from allotments.

**2.2** In implementing the Allotment Strategy a service will be developed in which people can expect:

- Suitable available allotment gardens within 2 kilometres of every residential property.(Birmingham offer 1 mile other neighbours do not specify)
- Safe and secure allotments sites with adequate fencing, good access, and adequate toilet facilities,
- Fair, efficient and effective allotment administration;
- Effective and appropriate allocation of resources;
- Adequate irrigation supplies by means of mains water standpipes; storage butts; and recycled rainwater provision.;
- Opportunities for developing gardening skills;
- Encouragement to sites and associations to develop local management;
- Fair and equitable rents and charges.

### **3.0 Aim 1: Providing Enough Allotments in the right locations**

**3.1** Allotment plots of a variety of sizes can be rented, but conventionally are reckoned in proportions of a standard full size plot of 320 square metres (so for example two people each renting 160 square metre sites will be reckoned as one full size plot equivalent). For convenience, in the rest of this document “plot” will mean a full size plot equivalent.

**3.2** The council owns and manages 248 plots on 11 allotment sites, and a further 1,186 plots on 25 sites, which are managed by the five existing allotment local management associations: a total of 1434 plots on 36 sites.

**3.3** In reviewing the numbers and distribution of allotments provided the main considerations are that :-

- There are no recognised national standards for allotment provision. Local standards are needed to guide any review.
- The capacity to respond to any likely possibilities that any change in patterns of use or demand for allotments should be retained.
- Standards of provision might not be appropriate on all sites or in all areas. Even when standards are confirmed for existing allotments, or any proposed alternative site/s local considerations (such as population density and recorded demand for allotments), as well as other council policies, must be taken into consideration.
- The national average of allotment provision is 6.3 plots per thousand population. Walsall currently has 5.5 plots per thousand population (among comparative Black Country authorities, Wolverhampton has 4.6, Sandwell has 5.5, Dudley has 3.5)
- The distribution of allotments in Walsall is not even and does not reflect demand. Some areas have a shortfall in provision, notably to the north of the borough in Brownhills and Aldridge, and also in Willenhall. Some sites have very low occupancy rates due to possible oversupply (Delves/Palfrey/Pleck), and some are partly or completely derelict due to unsuitable ground conditions, such as seasonal water logging at Herberts Park Road and Sproat Avenue, and silt deposition on parts of Lane Avenue site.

**3.4** The council proposes:

- To retain the current level of allotment provision and where possible to increase provision to 6.3 plots per 1000 population where demand is identified, with plots available no further than two kilometres from any residential location.
- To examine if local shortfalls in allotment provision can be addressed by utilising existing underused open space, without adversely affecting access to adequate public open space

- To examine alternative uses for allotment sites or portions of sites where provision considerably exceeds demand, on condition that:-
  1. There is consultation with representatives of the local allotments associations, existing tenants, and the local impact and local public opinion are considered.
  2. There are no tenants on the land under consideration, or that suitable alternative land can be found within two kilometres – and that loss of the land would not lead to under provision.
  3. In addition, where more suitable alternative locations can be offered and if tenants are in favour of moving, alternative uses for existing allotment land could be considered.
- When examining alternative uses priority should be given to :-
  1. The potential for generating revenue or capital income for investment in retained allotments
  2. The possibility of temporary uses, e.g. livestock grazing, public open space, which could be returned to allotments use should circumstances dictate the need.

**3.5** These proposals are set within the overall framework and operation of the council's planning policies, the local plan and the unitary development plan.

#### **4.0 Aim Two: Promoting the benefits of Allotment Gardens**

**4.1** The use of allotments has been in decline for many years, although there has been an increase in interest and uptake in the past few years

**4.2** The user consultation and survey has identified the main barriers and deterrents to allotment uptake and continued cultivation. In order of priority these are:

- Site security – Vandalism
- Site security – Theft
- Lack of, or condition of toilets
- Waste disposal issues
- Access – condition of site roads and paths
- Site security – personal safety
- Lack of, or condition of shelters or communal buildings
- Uncultivated plots
- Access – distance from home/no transport \*
- Costs – Rent and water \*
- Costs – equipment/plants/seeds \*
- Other - \*

*\* indicates that greater numbers of respondents gave a low priority than those rating the issue as high priority*

The removal of some or all of these barriers would be likely to have a profound promotional effect particularly if well advertised and reported.

Appendix E shows the estimates costs of addressing the main barriers surrounding site security; lack of toilets and access. In addition an element for signage/notice boards contributes to raising local awareness of allotments and provides better communication with allotment holders

**4.3** Promotion of a poor quality service would be of little value without improvement plans for the service, being adopted. However, there are good reasons to promote as well as reinvest in allotment gardens:

- The breakdown of allotment users suggests a need to promote allotments to under represented individuals and groups of users. This needs to build recognition of the range of benefits and the diversity of possible approaches to allotment and leisure gardening (Appendix A shows minor discrepancies for use by Black and minority ethnic [BME] groups from the demographic split in Walsall, and major variation when considering age)
- The high early tenancy failure rate shows that new users need advice and support if they are to continue allotment use.
- Good promotion not only creates demand, but converts latent, or hidden demand, into real demand



- Awareness of allotments in the wider community can create links to other with agendas concerning health; social inclusion; environment; and community among others

**4.4** The council proposes:

4.4.1 To retain existing and attract new users by investing any capital receipts from the disposal of allotments land in improvements to, or replacement of, allotment sites over the next five years. This will be used to ensure that sites have effective 2.1m high fencing and gateways on publicly accessible boundaries, main access ways in good condition, adequate and easy to use water supply, and accessible toilets,

4.4.2 To retain existing and attract new users by improving the quality of service, including:

- Revised management policies regarding management of vacant plots.
- Good customer service (see *Aim Three – Improved Administration*).
- Developing the role of site representatives and others at directly managed sites, with appropriate support and recognition.
- Targeted promotion of available plots in geographical locations adjacent to areas of surplus
- Supporting developments in joint purchasing and working arrangements.
- Attractive financial terms.
- Promotions targeted to a variety of communities and emphasising the benefits (eg physical and mental health; economic; social and environmental) of allotment use.

**4.5** It is difficult to predict the impact of these measures and set targets for occupation mainly because it is linked to the implementation of the proposed reinvestment programme, although there is evidence that those authorities which have implemented strategies have made documented improvements in all areas identified for action. Simply maximising the use of existing allotments and the disposal of unusable or overprovided land would be a benefit to the service.

## **5 Aim Three: Improved Administration**

**5.1** The need for administrative improvement is necessary to provide more efficient letting of plots; management of tenancies; the collection of rents and charges; and more successful applications for external funding of projects.

**5.2** Improvements have been identified which, in consultation with local management associations, should be considered and implemented over the period of this strategy

- Reviewing the form of local management agreements with allotment associations with a view to meeting the criteria of external funding organisations
- Preparation of operations manual for allotment managers.
- Making allotment rents equitable across the borough.
- Introduction of measures to manage arrears and debt.
- Better control over grant of discounts.
- Improved systems of record management.

### **5.3**

The council proposes:

- To finalise and adopt the procedures set out in an operations manual,
- Subject to any feasibility studies, to take advantage of the councils geographic information system, to digitise allotment records and make on line applications feasible, with links to rental records and financial systems.
- To continue to promote options for local management by allotment associations, in particular the opportunity to take full responsibility for administration, rent collection and site works, under the proposed reviewed local management agreements, or
- To support and develop the representative and site management role of site nominated representatives or committees at locally managed sites.
- To improve its network of contacts in the wider allotments community

## **6.0 Aim Four: Environmental Sustainability**

**6.1** Allotments provide a valuable network of green spaces across the borough. This is particularly important in areas of the borough which are heavily developed and where properties have smaller gardens, and where public open space is limited. However, the security measures necessary to protect allotments prevent their use as accessible public open space.

**6.2** The importance of allotments as wildlife habitats is widely recognised. However, much of this value has developed from under use, rather than by any environmental management decisions. Consequently, the environmental value not as great as it could be, and sites can appear to be derelict with associated problems of trespass, vandalism, and theft for existing and prospective users. There are opportunities to develop managed wildlife habitat in some areas of allotment land. This is particularly true on boundaries, and areas of steep slopes or localised wetland, and where development opportunities are not realistic. Some of these sites are highly visible in the local landscape and aesthetic improvements can be anticipated as a result of improved habitat management.

**6.4** Overall, there are important net benefits to both wildlife conservation and allotment gardening from positive and conscious choices about unused plots, compared to neglect and abandonment.

**6.5** On allotment plots in cultivation, principles of sustainable gardening are often observed. Seeking out and publicising these practices should encourage users and managers to adopt plot and site management with an eye on the environmental impact.

**6.6** Many allotment gardeners inadvertently produce surplus crops which sometimes end up as waste. There is an opportunity to organise central collection of surplus crops for distribution to those in the local community who might benefit most from a source of fresh fruit and vegetables.

**6.7** Allotment gardeners grow a wide range of crops from seed varieties which are no longer commercially available, or from their own self collected seed which contributes to the genetic variation and biodiversity of allotment sites and provides food and habitat to wildlife.

**6.8** The council will:

- Encourage the use of sustainable environmental practices including organic alternatives to fertilisers and pesticides. Including technical advice and assistance with the promotion of composting
- Seek to develop educational and demonstration projects,
- Achieve better management of existing natural features and also the creation of new and varied wildlife habitats where a decision has been made to manage unused allotment land for wildlife. This could involve a change of site designation to open space, where returning a site to allotment use would prove to be difficult.

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Where possible wildlife management will be in partnership with the councils countryside managers and other interested groups.

- Work with all interested parties to develop a collection and distribution network for surplus crops
- Encourage allotment gardeners to initiate a seed exchange pool

## 7.0 Aim Five: Maintaining adequate resources

### 7.1 Capital

- During the preparation of this strategy, user consultation has highlighted the need to provide enough allotments of a higher quality than currently provided.
- *Aim One: **Providing Enough Allotments in the right locations*** describes how under used and unsuitable sites can be identified for sale and reinvestment, and seeks to identify areas of deficiency and suitable land in those areas, which could be utilised as allotments
- *Aim Two: **Promoting the benefits of Allotment Gardens*** proposes reinvesting any capital receipts generated by the implementation of Aim One in improving existing sites or providing suitable alternative locations. The programming of reinvestment is dependent on the rate of progress in identifying and selling land.

### 7.2 Revenue:Cost

- Implementing this strategy will be a wasted investment if not maintained. During consultation the allotment movement emphasised that once on an improved physical and administrative footing, the service should be maintained and not allowed to deteriorate.
- Revenue costs will be increased by a higher level of site care, particularly weed control of empty plots. Any increases the occupancy rate would lessen the impact of this. Costs would be further controlled by the adoption of an operations manual with local management associations and site representatives described in Aim Three: Improved Administration.
- It is anticipated that the increased costs associated with provision of improved infrastructure standards will be offset by reductions in repairs and replacement costs in the short to medium term, however the long term maintenance, replacement and further improvement costs are likely to lead to increased funding requirements.
- The costs of servicing newly provided toilet facilities are likely to increase the need for revenue marginally (depending on design) although the main increased costs of water and sewerage charges are likely to be passed on to the tenants in line with current practice.

### 7.3 Revenue: Income

- Aim 2: Promoting Allotment Use proposes increases in tenancies over the next five years. This would result in higher occupancy and income rates on existing allotments. The disposal of underused or unusable site, and the replacement with suitable land in areas of deficiency would further increase occupancy and income from rents.
- The nearer the allotments service can get to breaking even, the less vulnerable it will be to any future financial savings requirements. Ideally allotments could reach revenue breakeven, with no net call on subsidy. In reality it is unlikely that this will occur as, at current subsidy levels the costs of renting an allotment would be likely to require increases of 400-500%
- It will be reasonable to consider options to move nearer to revenue break-even once the main aims of this strategy – to provide enough allotments; improve the condition of allotments and maximise occupancy – has been achieved.

Options could include:

1. Ring fencing and investment of any surplus capital receipts from the sale of land, (or income from other lettings), in a form of a *Trust* or in other financial products capable of providing long-term revenues.
  2. Regular review of rents and/or concession arrangements (although not to be a deterrent to users)
- Opportunities for external funding need to be more fully explored, a number of applications by LMA's have been rejected on the grounds of the management agreement by constitution, and the associations' lack of security of tenure.

### 8.0 Summary of Proposals

**Aim One: Providing Enough Allotments**

**Aim Two: Promoting Allotment Use**

**Aim Three: Good Administration**

**Aim Four: Environmental Stability**

**Aim Five: Maintaining adequate resources**

<b>Walsall Council Allotments Strategy Action Plan</b>				
<b>Aim One: Providing Enough Allotments in the right locations</b>				
Strategic Objective	Year	Timescale	Lead	Outcomes
To retain the current level of allotment provision and where possible to increase provision to 6.3 plots per 1000 population, with plots available no further than two kilometres from any residential location.				Maintained or increased allotments use Reduced areas of deficiency by distance
To examine if local shortfalls in allotment provision can be addressed by utilising existing underused open space				Identified relevant under used open space
To examine alternative uses for allotment sites or portions of sites where provision considerably exceeds demand				Alternative uses identified for appropriate sites
<b>Aim Two: Promoting the benefits of Allotment Gardens</b>				
Strategic Objective	Year	Timescale	Lead	Outcomes
Clarify the status of allotments				All existing allotment sites declared 'Statutory'
Removal of the barriers to the long term enjoyment and use of allotments				Disposal of surplus land and reinvestment in infrastructure (Appendix B) and administration (Aim Three)
Raising awareness of allotments				More diversity of individuals and groups using the allotments in greater numbers
To retain existing and attract new users				Numbers of long term tenants retained Numbers of new tenants/users Production of Allotment holders guidance.
<b>Aim Three: Improved Administration</b>				
Strategic Objective	Year	Timescale	Lead	Outcomes
Investigate proprietary allotments management systems, and provision if shown to be suitable				More efficient letting of plots;

				management of tenancies; collection of rents and charges
Review and amendment of LMA agreements/constitution				More successful applications for external funding of projects
Review and revise allotments tenancy agreements				Revised agreements
Improve day to day administration				Operations manual finalised and adopted
<b>Aim Four: Environmental Sustainability</b>				
<b>Strategic Objective</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Lead</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
Investigate, promote and encourage the use of sustainable environmental and organic practices in the management and cultivation of allotments regarding:-  Wildlife habitat;  Water use;  Use of pesticides/herbicides;  Composting;  Use of peat products				Information distributed  Increased biodiversity, more varied wildlife habitat  Reduced mains water usage, increased numbers of rainwater storage and users  Reduced usage of chemicals Reduction of allotments waste to landfill, and increased reuse/recycling of imported materials Reduced use of peat products
Promote partnership working with groups promoting LA21 (food production and biodiversity)				Inclusion of allotments in LA21 agenda and biodiversity action plans



				Distribution of surplus crops to other local people
Investigate availability of external funding for environmental projects				Funding/projects identified/obtained
<b>Aim Five: Maintaining adequate resources</b>				
<b>Strategic Objective</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Lead</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
Providing Enough Allotments in the right locations				Areas of deficiency and surplus identified. Possible alternative sites identified/ acquired. Sites suitable for disposal or alternative use identified
Promoting the benefits of Allotment Gardens				Investment in infrastructure. Closer matching of allotment users to borough demographic. Higher tenant retention and recruitment levels. Number of promotional items published and distributed.
Improved Administration				Assessment of use and possible acquisition of proprietary management software. Equitable rents and charges under regular review - increased income. Improved recruitment / retention of tenants – increased income
Environmental Sustainability				Wider usage/access to allotments. Increased food production and reducing carbon

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				<p>footprint</p> <p>Areas for managed wildlife habitat identified.</p> <p>Reduced use of finite materials (peat; chemicals; water) and increased re use or recycling (composted material; construction materials; rainwater capture)</p> <p>Distribution of surplus crops / rare seeds and plants.</p> <p>Sources of external funding identified / accessed</p>
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