

Fact Sheet

Allotments for All

Improving access for people with disabilities and mental health needs

Allotments provide a number of health and social benefits but are often inaccessible for the people they could most benefit. Many managers and associations are keen to improve access to their sites. The need to do so is underlined by the Disability Discrimination Act.

This factsheet provides an overview of the issues involved in improving accessibility and makes some practical suggestions for implementing them.

Getting it right from the start

Improving accessibility is *not* just about building raised beds and a wheelchair-accessible toilet. Welcoming attitudes, specially adapted tools and an understanding of easier gardening techniques are just as important as any physical improvements. However, the key to successfully improving accessibility is to consult current and prospective disabled users *at the very beginning*, so that any changes made are as relevant as possible to people's needs.

Promotion and consultation

Before you carry out any access improvements, try to gauge the level of interest and potential involvement in your area. Your disability advice centre, local disability organisations (see *Resources*),



Partially sighted Neville, with a productive plot already in his first year as plotholder. Note wooden top rail for seating

NHS Community Mental Health Team (from phone book or GPs' surgeries) and council social services should be able to give you some idea of who to contact.

Remember that disabled people – like anyone else – will want to garden either as part of a gardening group/project or as an individual gardener, so try to accommodate both options in your plans. The opportunity to take on their own plot can provide some welcome independence for disabled people. Their commitment may also be more sustained (long-term) than a grant-



Sefton Park Allotment Society decided to completely change their design for a disability access plot because their future users, a special needs charity, said they would prefer a polytunnel to raised beds. The association have decided that, rather than having rigid plans, they will wait until the charity are established on the plot and then introduce the adaptations gradually, according to what users find out they need as they go along.

dependent group or agency.

Remember also that allotments often provide respite for the carers or relatives of disabled people, so consider and consult them too. Even if the carer is not a gardener, they may welcome the chance to have a relaxing space, while the person they care for gardens.

Understanding the range of accessibility needs

Wheelchair users actually represent a very small proportion of all disabled people: access improvements should take into account the needs of the wide spectrum of disabilities which people who want to garden may face. Reduced mobility, visual impairment, hearing difficulties, head and spinal injuries are just some examples of conditions which may require very different access provision from wheelchair users. People with mental health needs, such as depression or panic attacks, are frequently neglected in improvements, and yet they can give and gain a lot in allotment gardening.

A welcoming attitude

Making the site accessible to a wider variety of people will mean that existing plotholders have to interact with people they are not familiar with. Like any individual, new plotholders with disabilities or mental health needs should be treated with patience, understanding, and respect. They are there because they love gardening (or wish to learn) and this shared interest can overcome many barriers. Some disabled people may feel excluded from society by their differences, so the

social aspects of allotment gardening can be especially valuable to them.

Existing plotholders may be unsure of how best to welcome new plotholders with different needs to their own. Some general advice might be helpful, for example:

- In the case of disabled people accompanied by a signer/helper, remind other people to direct their conversation to the individual, not their helper.
- It can be helpful to sit down when conversing with a wheelchair user, making eye contact easier.
- If talking to a partially sighted individual, don't move around too much and don't move out of earshot without telling them. You don't need to raise your voice either: as in any other conversation, allow a visually impaired person to tell you if they can't make out your voice. Ask if they need a guide when walking and let them show you how best to guide them.

Welcoming people with mental health needs

One in four of us will face mental health problems during our lifetime and gardening can be an important route to recovery.

Building new relationships can be a big challenge for a person with mental health needs as they are often stigmatised as being 'different' before they have had a chance to prove themselves. Many plot-holders with mental health needs, however, will be quite able to garden on their own and may require nothing more than a friendly atmosphere and to be treated like everyone else. If a person needs extra support they may come to the site with a social worker, activity leader, occupational therapist or 'buddy' to provide mutual support or guidance. With this assistance, they should be able to manage their plot adequately and managers/associations should not be afraid their tenancy will create a burden on the site.

Sometimes medications may cause drowsiness or make it hard for people to get up early: an understanding attitude may make all the difference between a



It is not only people with a physical disability that can benefit from allotment gardening – don't forget people with learning or mental health needs in your plans

successful and beneficial plot tenancy and an arrangement that no one is happy with.

It's best to think of each person as an individual with unique needs and let *them* tell you what extra requirements they might need, if any at all. An open-minded attitude is the best starting point to developing successful participation in any site.

Site Management

An adaptable and thoughtful approach to site management, combined with a thorough understanding of your existing and future plotters' needs, is just as important as actual physical improvements to site design in improving site accessibility. Evidence of such an approach might include:

- Willingness to adapt sites, e.g. changing plot sizes, raising plots from ground level and acceptance of leisure gardening.
- Openness to different gardening techniques such as 'no dig' gardening and mulching, which can reduce physical labour.
- Valuing all plotters, regardless of their differences, in the site management and 'life' of the site.

- Working in partnership with different organisations to promote use of the site to under-represented groups.
- Identifying people who are willing to help less physically able gardeners with heavy work or organising communal plot workdays.

If safety and crime are an issue on your site, find out which days different plotters tend their plot, so reducing the need for vulnerable individuals to garden alone or in small numbers. Introduce a 'buddy system', whereby gardeners who are physically disabled are paired up with a more physically able person, or new gardeners are paired up with someone with more experience. This system not only provides support, but also a more welcoming and sociable introduction for newcomers. Consider the need to improve other safety and security measures. Getting funding for better site fencing is often easier when it provides a benefit for vulnerable or under-represented groups. Allocate plots for vulnerable gardeners in a more visible or 'peopled' section of the site.

Remember that non-cultivation may be due to a change in a person's circumstances: they may be unwell or have become unable to carry out heavy work, yet do not want to give up a much-loved plot. Ensure your tenancy agreement includes a clause that requires tenants to notify the committee as soon as these extenuating circumstances arise. Treat such cases with sympathy and discretion. Compile a list of volunteers who are willing to help with heavy labour when difficulties arise. Covering the plot with a mulch will keep weeds at bay until the plotter can return.

Finally, rather than launching into an expensive programme of raised beds, start with the improvement of general access around the site (see below), building up an information library on tools and techniques for easier gardening and the gradual purchase of special tools for communal use, tailored to needs of plotters. Only move on to making adaptations to individual plots when you are sure you understand what is really needed.

Consider also introducing complementary uses of allotments (see page 6) as a means of improving accessibility.

Getting around, into and out of your site

The following is a list of suggestions for physical improvements to access into and within the site:

- If you are able to provide car parking, try to allocate parking spaces close to plots and/or make the plots nearest the gate available for people with mobility problems.
- Ensure gates are easy to open with handles that are accessible from a wheelchair. For dimensions see *Resources*.
- Paths should be firm, non-slip, non-glare and level, with turning space for wheelchairs.
- Provide a water supply close to plots, again on level, firm ground and accessible from a wheelchair.
- Provide a toilet close to plots if possible or, if this is not possible, a clear notice explaining where the nearest toilet is. If a key system is used ensure that there are also notices explaining this and that keys are readily available to anyone who needs them. You could use a registered key system. For more information see ARI factsheet *Safe Sites*.
- Try to ensure that meetings are held in accessible venues, whether on or off



Wheelchair user on adapted plot in Portsmouth

- site, e.g. wheelchair users require entry ramps and doors wide enough for the wheelchair to pass through.
- Ensure notices around the site are clear, written in large letters and plain English. Simple pictorial signs may be easier to interpret for those with literacy problems, e.g. people with certain learning difficulties. The need for signs in different languages should also be considered.
- An initial tour of the site, pointing out essential features and information, could reduce the need for plotholders to rely on signs to guide them.
- A site free of hazards will reduce difficulties for all. Take care to minimise hidden hosepipes, potholes, broken glass, and uneven/unkept paths, and encourage clearly labelled plots and boundaries. See ARI pack *Health and Safety on allotments: A management guide*.

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

Under this Act, all organisations, buildings and open spaces that provide services for, or are open to, the public are required to make 'reasonable adjustments' to ensure disabled people are not being discriminated against. Discrimination occurs when a disabled person is treated less favourably than someone else, for a reason relating to that person's disability.

In the case of an allotment, this is likely to mean carrying out an audit of how accessible and easy it would be for disabled people (this includes a wide range of disabilities) to work a plot. Whoever has



Hayley's Field Allotment Association



Thrive

Raised beds for people with restricted mobility. Note foot holes for closer access, plastic top for seating and 'easy slide' plastic hand rails around plot for walking support

overall responsibility for the site will be responsible for ensuring this audit is undertaken, recorded and acted upon.

Audits need not imply expensive consultants' fees: contact the organisations listed in *Resources* to see what help is available. The two key questions to ask are:

- What adjustments to the present layout, management and promotion of the site could be made to improve access? Access needs to take account of both physical and intellectual barriers, e.g. from gates that are tricky to open to confusing leaflets that are not in plain English.
- What would be reasonable with the resources available?

But what about the cost?

Creating accessible allotments can be costly: adapting a plot for a wheelchair user, including raised beds and toilet, can cost £15,000 - £25,000. On the positive side, improving access for disabled people is often a high priority of grant-giving bodies. It is also important to remember that not all adjustments will necessarily cost money, e.g. allocating plots closest to the entrance for people with mobility problems.

See ARI information pack *A guide to fundraising for allotment associations* for ideas on grants and fundraising.

Adaptations to plots

Once you have decided which adaptations you need to make, do not rush into construction work. The design stage is just



A sink is easier for some disabled users to wash hands, crops etc in than a standpipe. A hose is used for watering.

as important, so take your time planning improvements that you are sure will be durable and effective. Although many adaptations (e.g. raised beds) are not difficult to build using 'DIY' methods, do try to work the cost of a reputable landscape designer into your budgets. This will help you plan designs that will be pleasing to the eye and effective; people are less likely to use a clumsy, concrete raised bed than a graceful wooden one. Always ask to see photographs of previous work.

Thrive, Trellis and The Sensory Trust produce relevant publications. Also, try to visit some examples of adapted plots in your region to get ideas of what does and doesn't work (see the *Case Studies* section of this factsheet. Your ARI Mentor can also provide details of projects in your area).

Raised Beds

Raised beds can make gardening more accessible to people who find working at ground level difficult or tiring, e.g. visually impaired people, wheelchair users, elderly gardeners or people with bad backs. A well-designed raised bed can reduce the amount of bending, provide a place to sit and work and a leaning place for someone who is unsteady on their feet.

The basic principle when designing raised beds is to vary the heights and widths of the beds to meet different needs. People come in all different shapes and sizes and their needs will change over time so it's best to avoid a uniform 'one size fits all' approach and to opt for a mixture of shapes and heights of beds instead.

Raised beds should have a top rim or ledge at the right height and wide enough to sit on so gardeners may rest their legs. Railways sleepers are a useful building material but remember that it is illegal to use second hand sleepers coated with creosote in areas where skin contact is frequent. Sleepers preserved with alternatives to creosote are available.

Raised beds for wheelchair users are sometimes built too wide and/or too high to be useful. When designing the bed, work out if you could comfortably reach the soil in the middle of the bed, whilst sitting down with your shoulders relaxed and the

soil below elbow level. If you know who the users will be, try rigging up some 'mock' raised beds and getting their feedback on dimensions. The tools that gardeners will use also determine design to some extent.

A table-shaped raised bed - or one with an indent at the base allowing the lower body to fit underneath - can allow wheelchair users to get closer to the soil area. Beds in a square figure of eight shape mean that wheelchair users do not have to get wheels under the raised bed and can position themselves in the middle and then work either side.

Soil can be prone to drying in raised beds so make sure that plenty of organic matter is worked in and consider how to irrigate. Lining the inside with polythene can reduce erosion and prevent soil being washed out.

A supply of tables are also useful for people with restricted mobility, providing surfaces for planting up pots and growbags, pricking out of seed trays or label writing.

Edging paths

A small raised edge to paths can be used as a tapping rail by blind gardeners who navigate with canes, and can prevent wheelchair users running into soft soil. However, edging can cause other users to trip or fall, so design carefully. A brightly painted edge (e.g. white or yellow), which creates a contrasting boundary, may be useful if you have gardeners with visual impairments on site.

Helping people maintain plots

Some practical suggestions:

- Sheds – near to hand for storage and shelter.
- Water – near to hand to avoid the need for carting heavy loads any distance and reduce the need for hosepipes which can present a tripping hazard. Fit low level keg-taps to butts for easy watering can filling.
- Shared resources – consider buying shared adaptable tools (see *Tools* section below).

- Safety and security policy – can help encourage regular attendance thus keeping on top of maintenance.
- At site meetings, consider whether anyone is willing to help with heavy work/communal work days.
- Glass greenhouses or cold frames may present a hazard if vandalised or in disrepair. Consider a polytunnel or polycarbonate greenhouses instead.

Techniques for easier gardening

Digging can cause injuries to even the most able gardener. 'No dig' gardening, usually combined with some sort of raised bed system, can cut this most physical of gardening activities while still obtaining high yields of crops. The 'deep bed' is useful for no dig systems: narrow, slightly raised beds edged with planking.

Using a 'mulch' to cover the soil can also cut labour as it reduces weed growth and water loss. Intensive production systems, in which the plot is divided into smaller modules, can also reduce labour.

Contact Garden Organic for relevant publications.

Tools for easier gardening

There are a range of tools designed for easier gardening, eg trowels with extended handles for use from a sitting position, tools adapted for one handed use or weak grips. There are a number of kneeling aids that can take the pain out of planting and weeding.

The Thrive website at www.carryongardening.org.uk gives advice on tool purchasing.

Complementary uses of allotments

Allowing allotments to be used as leisure gardens can open up their benefits to people who are not able to manage traditional food growing and enable more people to enjoy the privacy, empowerment and freedom to make decisions derived from having 'a patch of land.'

People who are not able to garden individually can benefit from the support of

Case studies

To contact any of the projects featured please contact ARI.

Sefton Park Allotment Society has a plot for a charity providing training to people with learning needs, from stroke victims to Downs Syndrome.

Elder Stubbs, Oxford, provides facilities for disabled people and also partnerships with long-term unemployed, homeless and mental health organisations. Includes an organic market garden and orchard run as a horticultural therapy project for people recovering from mental illness.

www.elderstubbs.org.uk

Brighton and Hove Allotment Federation has sites suitable for people with visual impairments, mobility problems, people with special learning needs, and those with mental health needs. Provision includes vehicle access within 10 metres and a designated parking area, support from other allotment gardeners, shelter with seating

provided, accessible paved paths, raised bed plots which are easy to work from both sides, and a disabled access toilet.

www.bhaf.org.uk

Prudhoe Community Allotment, Northumberland, has been designed to be especially suitable for elderly people and disabled gardeners, with raised beds and easy access. This includes a community greenhouse with disabled access, raised beds, wheelchair suitable pathways, and disabled toilets.

www.northumberlandlife.org/pca

Fromside Allotment Association has two plots for use by disabled people with raised beds, toilet, access improvements, and wheelchair storage sheds

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council's allotment sites provide facilities for both groups of disabled people and individual plot holders. Some sites also have links with the local hospital enabling people with mental health issues to garden.

a gardening or food growing group. Many groups and associations develop to provide accredited training, other skills development, education in healthy living, social interaction and teamwork.

Including sensory aspects in garden designs can enhance enjoyment for all, especially people with dementia, learning, sensory or physical disabilities.

Contact Thrive, Trellis, The Sensory Trust and FCFCG for relevant publications.

Note: A change of use of a statutory allotment must be carried out using the correct legislative framework, or land can lose its legal protection (see ARI factsheet *Project Allotment*).



A polytunnel is a useful addition to any adapted plot, providing a productive growing environment and rain shelter.

Resources

www.carryongardening.org.uk

Thrive's easier gardening website, with a wealth of advice and contacts on gardening for a variety of needs.

Equality and Human Rights Commission

An independent body, established to eliminate discrimination against disabled people and promote equality of opportunity.

Tel. (0845) 604 6610

www.equalityhumanrights.com

National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG)

The national representative body for the allotment movement in the UK.

www.nsalg.org.uk

natsoc@nsalg.org.uk

Tel. (01536) 266 576



Our vision is to increase allotment uptake by individuals and groups

Contact ARI at:

The GreenHouse
Hereford Street
Bristol BS3 4NA

Tel: 0117 963 1551
Fax: 0117 923 1900

ari@farmgarden.org.uk
www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari

This fact sheet is also available in large print, braille or on audio tape from the ARI office

Please feel free to photocopy and circulate ARI publications

These organisations all offer a range of relevant publications:

Thrive

Social and therapeutic horticulture.

Tel. (0118) 988 5688
www.thrive.org.uk
info@thrive.org.uk

Trellis (Scotland)

Supporting health through horticulture.

Tel. (01738) 624 348
www.trellisscotland.org.uk
info@trellisscotland.org.uk

Allotments Regeneration Initiative (ARI)

Supports and develops allotments regeneration and the creation of brand new allotment sites in the UK.

www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari
ari@farmgarden.org.uk
Tel. (0117) 963 1551

Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG)

Supports, represents and promotes community-managed farms and gardens across the UK.

www.farmgarden.org.uk
admin@farmgarden.org.uk
Tel. (0117) 923 1800

Garden Organic

Organic gardening.

Tel: (024) 7630 3517
enquiry@gardenorganic.org.uk
www.gardenorganic.org.uk

Royal Horticultural Society

Tel. (020) 7834 4333
info@rhs.org.uk
www.rhs.org.uk

The Sensory Trust

Advice and publications on inclusive environmental design.

Tel. (01726) 222 900
enquiries@sensorytrust.org.uk
www.sensorytrust.org.uk

These organisations can give details of relevant organisations in your area:

Dial UK

Nationwide network of 100 local disability advice centres.

Tel. (01302) 310 123
dialuk@scope.org.uk
www.dialuk.org.uk

Royal Association for Disability And Rehabilitation (RADAR)

700 local member contacts of disability organisations.

Tel. (020) 7250 3222
radar@radar.org.uk
www.radar.org.uk

Help the Aged

Tel. (020) 7278 1114
info@helptheaged.org.uk
www.helptheaged.org.uk

(Also have publications on gardening for older people).

RNIB

Working for blind and partially sighted people throughout the UK.

Tel: (020) 7388 1266
helpline@rnib.org.uk
www.rnib.org.uk

MENCAP

Working for and with people with learning disabilities and their families.

Tel. (020) 7454 0454
information@mencap.org.uk
www.mencap.org.uk

Mind

Mental health charity.

Tel. (0845) 766 0163
contact@mind.org.uk
www.mind.org.uk