

## Fact Sheet

### Project Allotment

A guide for groups and agencies working on allotments



YOE, Birmingham

**...as participation in allotment gardening widens, new users have come on the scene...**



St Werburgh's City Farm



Hangleton Playlink



Moulescombe Forest Garden



Traditionally individuals have cultivated allotments, with some input from friends or family. New users have now come on the scene, from food growing collectives to therapeutic and educational schemes. These include day centres for special needs, refugee projects, college training schemes and youth groups.

These users help to bring the benefits of allotment gardening to a wide selection of people that would not be involved otherwise. They offer activities and

resources beyond the scope of the conventional allotment. They may also play a role in regenerating sites, especially in areas where uptake of allotments by individuals is low.

Occasionally the impact of such groups may be less than positive: this may happen if the group does not understand how allotments are managed, or is unaware of the obligations to the site and other users.

This factsheet provides guidance for groups taking on allotments.



Headingley Station Allotment Association

*Many hands make light work*

## How allotment sites are organised

There are three types of site:

- A statutory site is protected by law under Section 8 of the 1925 Allotments Act.
- A temporary site has no legal protection as it may be annexed for eventual change of use (e.g. cemetery over-flow).
- A private site is one owned by a charitable trust, an individual, a company, a church or the plottolders.

Most (but by no means all) allotment sites are owned by a local authority (the district, borough, town or parish council). The point of contact at the authority will be the allotments or parks officer (clerk or technical assistant for smaller councils).

Many allotment sites (including those owned by a local authority) will have an association, society, committee or site representative(s). Contact details can be obtained from the local authority, site notice board or by asking a plotholder on site.

Sites may be managed solely by the local authority, the association or somewhere in between.

## Definition of an allotment

Section 22 of the 1922 Allotment Act defines the term 'allotment garden' as:

*"An allotment not exceeding forty poles in extent which is **wholly or mainly cultivated by the occupier** for the production of **vegetable or fruit crops** for consumption by himself or his family."* (40 poles is 1012 square metres).

This definition is still relevant today because carrying out any activities on a statutory allotment site that are not covered by this definition could threaten the site's legal protection.

Some leeway is permitted. The terms in the definition are usually interpreted as follows:

- **The occupier** refers to an individual, so if several people cultivate a plot only one is legally the tenant.
- **'Wholly or mainly'** means that as long as the plot is used mainly for growing fruit or vegetables, a section can be used as a garden, for non-food crops, or a wildlife area.
- **'Wholly or mainly'** also means that surplus produce can be given away or sold.
- **'Vegetable and fruit crops'** could include fruit bushes, fruit trees or perennial vegetables.



## The tenancy agreement

Activities that can be carried out on an allotment may also be restricted by the tenancy agreement, the 'contract' set up between the plot tenant and allotment authority. Tenancy agreements are written by the local authority or, if the site is self-managed, the committee, and vary from site to site. Plotholders can be evicted if they breach the tenancy agreement.

Many tenancy agreements do not permit:

- the planting of trees or perennials
- the building of ponds or sheds
- the sale of produce
- livestock.

Tenancy agreements can be problematic for groups because legally they can only be made out to individuals. Therefore a group's tenancy agreement will usually be made out to the project leader, or other named individual, who will be legally responsible for members of the group and visitors.

## Becoming accepted by the other plotholders

Some plotholders feel very anxious about groups taking on plots. They may dread the thought of strangers disturbing their peace or may have had to pick up the pieces from a previous project that disappeared when the funding ran out. Most groups say that initial prejudices melt away once the project is set up and running smoothly. Once you are accepted, the accumulated wisdom of other plotholders will often prove invaluable.

Some common initial problems and their possible solutions are described below.

### Plotholders are offended that no-one has told them what is happening

When you see plotholders on the site, talk to them and tell them about your project: time spent at this stage will be more than re-paid in the long term. Talking to as many people as possible gives you an idea of whether any initial resistance is widespread or down to certain individuals on the site. If the tenancy agreement

permits it, post up contact details of the project on the plot.

### Plotholders seem 'anti groups'

Projects that evolve slowly are accepted more easily. Do not take on more plots than you can realistically cope with or you will rapidly lose credibility. One plot can be a considerable commitment for even several people, and you can always rent more plots once you have got the first one established.

Some people may feel resentful if they see lots of new tools and equipment arriving, especially if they have spent years fighting for a new fence or standpipes. Acquire these slowly, as you develop an idea of what is most needed by your group. This approach will also attract less theft or vandalism.

Carry out any building works gradually where possible, as the noise, pollution and disruption that these create can also turn other plotholders against you.

### Plotholders cannot tell if strangers on site are intruders or members of your group

Do not allow the site key to be copied amongst the group. There should be a nominated keyholder(s), who is known by the site rep and other plotholders. Other members of the group or visitors to the project should be accompanied by a nominated keyholder.

Encourage all members of your group to become members of the allotment association by name, either as full plotholders or associate members.



*A wildlife pond has many attractions – for people and wildlife*

## Gardening expertise

Detailed gardening advice is outside the scope of this factsheet but gardening expertise is obviously an important part of your project! Here are a few tips and resources to help you find the information you will need.

- Persistent perennial weeds are often more of a problem on an allotment than in the average garden. A good strategy is to cover the majority of the plot with a weed suppressing mulch and peel this back as you are ready to cultivate each section. See ARI factsheet *Restore the plot* for more information.
- Membership of Garden Organic includes a range of gardening factsheets, a 'Starting an allotment' leaflet, visits to demonstration organic gardens and talks on allotments.
- A subscription to monthly magazine *Kitchen Garden*, which provides month-by-month food growing advice relevant to allotments.
- Build up a library of gardening books, such as 'The New Vegetable and Herb Expert', 'Successful Allotments' and 'The Organic Bible' (see *Resources*).
- Attend a gardening course at your local college or arrange gardening training courses on your allotment.



*Making apple juice at Horfield Organic Community Orchard*

## Putting allotments to complementary uses

Allotments have been put to a range of complementary uses not covered by the legal definition of a statutory allotment. These include public gardens, orchards, vineyards, composting schemes, nature reserves, Christmas/native tree nurseries, animal grazing, coppiced hazel/willow and vegetable box schemes.

Any site selected for such a project should have a genuine surplus of land; in other words, one that can accommodate the project whilst retaining sufficient plots for current and future plottolders.

Consult existing plottolders and other stakeholders on your ideas. Ideally the

project will increase uptake of the remaining plots by making the site as a whole more appealing.

Do not be too ambitious with your project plans to start with: it is easy to let your enthusiasm run away with you. Take your original project proposal and be ruthless: halve the workload and put back the deadlines. Talk to other projects and discover how many unforeseen setbacks you are bound to encounter.

Even on a successful site there is often scope for diversification that enhances the site, e.g. turning a few vacant plots over to a children's play area, a picnic area or parking spaces for disabled plot holders.

### Legal procedures for complementary uses

**Use the following procedure for any complementary uses of statutory allotment sites, otherwise the land could lose its legal protection.**

Section 27(5) of the 1908 Allotments Act provides for the temporary use of allotment land for other purposes, if it cannot be let as allotments.

If the land is subsequently required for use as allotments the authority can gain possession by giving at least 12 months' notice. The land must be in tenantable condition for allotment gardens at the time of repossession.

This legislation could also be used to accommodate group use covered by a standard tenancy agreement.

A lease agreement is set up between the management authority and the new user. This should include:

- rent payable
- a breakdown of land management duties and who will do them
- the length of lease, which may be long-term (even up to twenty years) but often with a seven-year review.

Food growing co-operatives may be covered by Section 27(6) of the 1908 Act as it states: "*the council having the power of letting one or more allotments to persons working on a co-operative system*". Contact NSALG (see *Resources*).





Wellbeck Road Allotments

*Make sure you've thought about how you'll enjoy that well-earned cup of tea*

The managing authority may only lease (or sell) statutory allotment land for a permanent change of use after consent from the Secretary of State, under Section 8 of the 1925 Act. Consent will not be required for any subsequent change of use (including development).

## Comfort of the group and other issues

- ✓ Will you need a toilet? If there isn't one on or near the site, get permission to hire a chemical toilet or build a compost toilet. Consult ARI factsheet Installing an affordable toilet.
- ✓ Will you need to provide transport for your group? Is there adequate parking and access to the plot at the site?
- ✓ Have you allowed for meal times and provided drink facilities?
- ✓ If there is nowhere to shelter in bad weather or store your tools, get permission to erect a shed, polytunnel or shipping container.
- ✓ Make sure the participants come to the allotment in suitable outdoor gear. It may be necessary to provide wellies,

waterproofs and even 'charity shop' jumpers/coats in case of sudden weather changes.

- ✓ If the group only visits the plot every few days, you will need to think who will come and water the plot in dry spells and do security checks.
- ✓ How will you attract new people to the group if people drop out?

For more ideas please see *Tips from projects* on the following pages.

## What if the project falls apart?

If you have adequate insurance and have followed the guidance in this factsheet, you should not run into any serious difficulties. However, even the most well run project may eventually end.

Finish up properly, for the benefit of other plotholders and reputation of future allotment projects. Terminate your tenancy and return all the keys. Remove all materials or plants that you introduced to the plot(s), unless the managing authority and association are happy for them to remain.



*Suitable outdoor gear is a must*

## Tips from projects

*If you wish to get in touch with any of these projects, please contact ARI.*

### Plot design and equipment

#### Rotherham Primary Care Trust

- Bought a cheap metal shed for storage but it was too flimsy. Secured a grant and planning permission for a second-hand shipping container – very secure.
- Two polytunnels - good for working undercover in bad weather and for growing a wider range of plants. Tables for seed planting work. Do require more volunteers for extra watering involved. Ventilation was not adequate for tomatoes (fungus) so have now purchased a greenhouse too.
- Compost bins were donated and a local contractor brings leaves and green waste.

#### Garden of Easton, Bristol

- No seed propagation area so created a hot bed instead. For information on hot bed construction visit: [www.holon.se/garden/howto/hotbed\\_en.shtml](http://www.holon.se/garden/howto/hotbed_en.shtml)
- Built a 'wattle and daub' all-weather shelter with help from the local school. The shelter is also used for green woodworking workshops when there is no gardening work.
- Built a compost toilet for £50 using all reclaimed materials and voluntary labour.



Low Moor Allotments, York

- No water on site and too expensive to install. Set up a rainwater collection system using recycled plastic butts and run-off from neighbouring garage roof.

#### Groundwork East Durham

- Polytunnels got badly wind-damaged, not as hardy as expected and difficult to fix. Not suitable for sites exposed to a north east wind.
- When they got a greenhouse this attracted lots of new volunteers, as they now had a warm, indoor space to work.
- Rotavators and strimmers were a waste of money. Noisy and heavy, not so suitable for projects for elderly women, children or less mobile people.
- Raised beds did not attract wheelchair users but are popular with the school groups – sense of ownership, easier to work, manageable size so less daunting.
- Included a campfire area for tea drinking in the design which has proved very popular.

#### BTCV Northamptonshire

- Range of attractive raised beds of different heights, makes them suitable for a range of users.

#### Lancashire Wildlife Trust

- Don't buy too many tools to start with, as you won't know what you need until you start. Buy basic tools first then build up stocks as they become necessary.

### Keeping it going

#### Teeside Homeless Action

- Watering has been a big problem in summer. By working hard to attract and encourage volunteers they have now solved the problem.
- Found that providing a wide range of activities maintained volunteer



interest. Providing both a garden and food growing areas meant that people could learn about flower beds and amenity gardening as well as vegetable growing, fruit and composting.

- Provide training in horticultural skills and crafts e.g. hurdle fencing.

### **Rotherham Primary Care Trust**

- Had some 'fair weather gardeners', who disappeared in winter.
- Found social events brought in new people – barbecue, fun day, park rangers running workshops in bat and bird box-building, bouncy castle, seed planting, apple day events.
- Looking at the possibility of setting up accredited training courses on site.

### **BTCV Northamptonshire**

- Involve a number of school groups but it has been difficult to get the children to come outside of the school sessions. Turnover of teachers is a problem, some are keen about bringing children, others are too nervous.
- Some volunteers come as part of the work experience they are doing with the local park.
- Have found the other ploholders very valuable – good information exchange.

### **Garden of Easton, Bristol**

- Have used site for workshops in practical skills such as building a hot bed or pond. Participants learn new skills and want to come back to see how their handiwork develops.
- At first they involved lots of different groups which proved to be high maintenance as it was too difficult to meet the demands of all the groups, so they just concentrate on a few groups now.
- Giving volunteers responsibility and decision-making powers leads to ownership and responsibility, which leads to commitment.



Godolphin Community Garden

### **Groundwork East Durham**

- Trying to cover the summer watering was difficult, causing divisions between different groups in the project, which put people off. If you do not have enough people for summer watering, opt for less 'thirsty' summer crops.
- Offered health-led incentives to participants, e.g. free pass to leisure centres, day trips to botanic gardens.

### **Lancashire Wildlife Trust**

- Don't get flustered if projects go up and down – communities change and people change, accept change and don't try and force it.
- Has to be welcoming so that new people come in. Don't ask big commitments from people: have a fixed day of the week when people can drop in and help for a couple of hours if they wish.
- Run the project like an outdoor community centre – lots of tea and biscuits – the social element is important.
- Aim to cater for all skills and talents, providing tasks for both experts and novices.
- A core of 8 – 10 dedicated people is enough, you don't need a big group. Expand to 20 and the group dynamics get too complicated. Smaller groups take more responsibility and know who's doing what.

Our vision is to  
increase allotment  
uptake by individuals  
and groups

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## Resources

### 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

### 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

### Garden Organic (formerly HDRA)

Organic gardening. Network of local groups. Publications and advice.

Tel. (0247) 630 3517

enquiry@gardenorganic.org.uk

www.gardenorganic.org.uk

### Community Composting Network (CCN)

Starter pack for community composting schemes.

Tel: (0114) 258 0483

ccn@gn.apc.org

www.othas.org.uk/ccn

### Thrive

Network of therapeutic gardening projects, many on allotments. Publications include building raised beds and designing gardens for special needs.

Tel: (0118) 988 5688

info@thrive.org.uk

www.thrive.org.uk



*A group of Sikh women growing vegetables for their temple which is adjacent to their plot at Ladypitt Lane allotments in Leeds*

### British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV)

Publications on various topics including tree planting and hedging, risk assessments and tool care.

Tel: (0149) 182 1600

information@btcv.org.uk

www.btcv.org

## Useful publications

### Kitchen Garden magazine

www.kitchengarden.co.uk

### The New Vegetable and Herb Expert

- good vegetable growing book for beginners.

ISBN: 0-903-50546-0

### Green Essentials Organic Guides -

'Successful allotments' - a little full colour booklet on starting an allotment. Price £3.

www.impactpublishing.co.uk

### The Organic Bible

by Bob Flowerdew

ISBN: 1-856-26595-1





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