

Allotment Strategy and Action Plan 2014 – 2024 for Brighton & Hove

Strategy Briefing



Weald Allotments (photograph courtesy of Brighton & Hove Food Partnership)



Brighton & Hove
City Council

How the strategy has been developed

The Allotment Strategy is co-produced by Brighton & Hove City Council and the Brighton & Hove Allotment Federation (BHAF). A strategy steering group oversaw the process with the involvement of council officers, staff from the Public Health team and the Food Partnership. BHAF's team was elected from its membership and its participation in the strategy discussed at their AGM in March 2013. BHAF members were also invited to participate in strategy working groups that looked at land, governance, finance and research. Regular strategy updates were included in BHAF newsletters and on their website.

Key principles in developing the strategy were:

- **Partnership:** without the commitment of both the council and the Allotment Federation to jointly look for solutions and commit to resolving them together, this strategy could never have been written. This principle of partnership work will need to be maintained if this strategy is to be successfully implemented.
- **Informed by evidence:** this included open sharing of information with the strategy steering / working groups about the current way the service is delivered including detailed financial information.
- **That it would involve a setting down of current practices and future ambitions:** this is so that there is an understanding of where we are (even if the people involved now leave), where we want to be and a framework for making decisions in future.
- **A bottom up approach:** the strategy was built with a commitment to being led by the allotment community at its heart with time built into the process for consultation and engagement. Consultation included:
 - Two very detailed surveys – of plot holders (808), community plots (9) and of people on the waiting list (901) – which between them gathered over 1700 responses and generated an enormous wealth of information and opinion
 - A consultation event with over 50 attendees
 - A facilitated focus group with 12 site representatives
 - Interviews with key council staff

The consultation work with plot holders and the waiting list and the compilation of the strategy document has been supported by the Brighton & Hove Food Partnership. The Allotment Strategy and Action Plan is recognised as a key area of work in achieving the ambitions set out in 'Spade to Spoon Digging Deeper: a food strategy for Brighton & Hove' (2012).

Because many of the issues covered are of a long term nature the strategy set out a route map for the next 10 years. It is underpinned by an action plan which will be reviewed annually by the Allotment Liaison Group¹. A full strategy review will take place in 2019.

¹ A new liaison group with terms of reference will be established to include BHAF, BHCC and other stakeholders

The Vision

Enjoyable, inclusive, sustainable and affordable allotments for Brighton & Hove

Objectives:

- Provide an economic way for people to produce good quantities of high quality, locally grown food.
- Increase the number of people participating in food growing on allotments, so that all sections of the community – particularly the most vulnerable - can enjoy the benefits and fulfil their horticultural potential.
- Ensure sufficient availability of good quality, accessible land for allotments.
- Work towards a self-sustaining and efficiently run service that keeps down costs for both tenants and the council.
- Encourage on site participation to ensure the protection and promotion of allotments for food growing.
- Support the very best practice in growing, so that allotments are a source of education and inspiration for the whole city in good food and healthy living.
- Ensure that the allotment sites, alongside the main role of food growing, play a role in conserving the biodiversity of the city contributing to a healthy living environment.
- Take a co-operative and participative approach to running the service and developing allotment policies and practices.
- Ensure that learning and evidence gathered from the development of this strategy is shared within the city and used to inform other policy work.

Allotments in Brighton & Hove

In Brighton & Hove there are 3,092 plots² including 30 community plots on 37 sites managed by Brighton & Hove City Council. Evidence gathered during the strategy consultation process suggests that 6,000+ people take part in food growing on allotments.

The current waiting list is approx 1000 people with the waiting time for a plot generally being two-four years depending on the site.

In 2012/13, the rental income from allotments was £107,155 and the expenditure was £155,123. All the council's allotment income currently comes from plot rentals. The shortfall between income and expenditure, called the allotment service subsidy was approx £48,000 in 2012/13. The rental charge of an allotment in 2013 /14 is 28.56p per m² or 125m² (half plot) = £35.70, 250m² (full plot) = £71.40. This price includes the land rent (m²), water, security & fencing, basic maintenance and administration.

A 25% discount is applicable for the following groups – people over 60, residents in receipt of benefits and students. This discount aims to enable people who may most benefit from allotment growing but are not be able to afford the full rent to participate. The largest group of concessions are those aged 60+ with 704 plot holders getting this discount.

² As of October 2013

Purpose of allotments

The primary aim of allotments is to provide an economic way for people to grow their own healthy, affordable, sustainable food however as the evidence from the strategy consultation shows, allotments are about 'more than just the veg'. The benefits for the mental health and wellbeing of residents; and the role that allotments play in the city's network of green spaces are also reasons for ensuring that the allotment community in the city thrives.

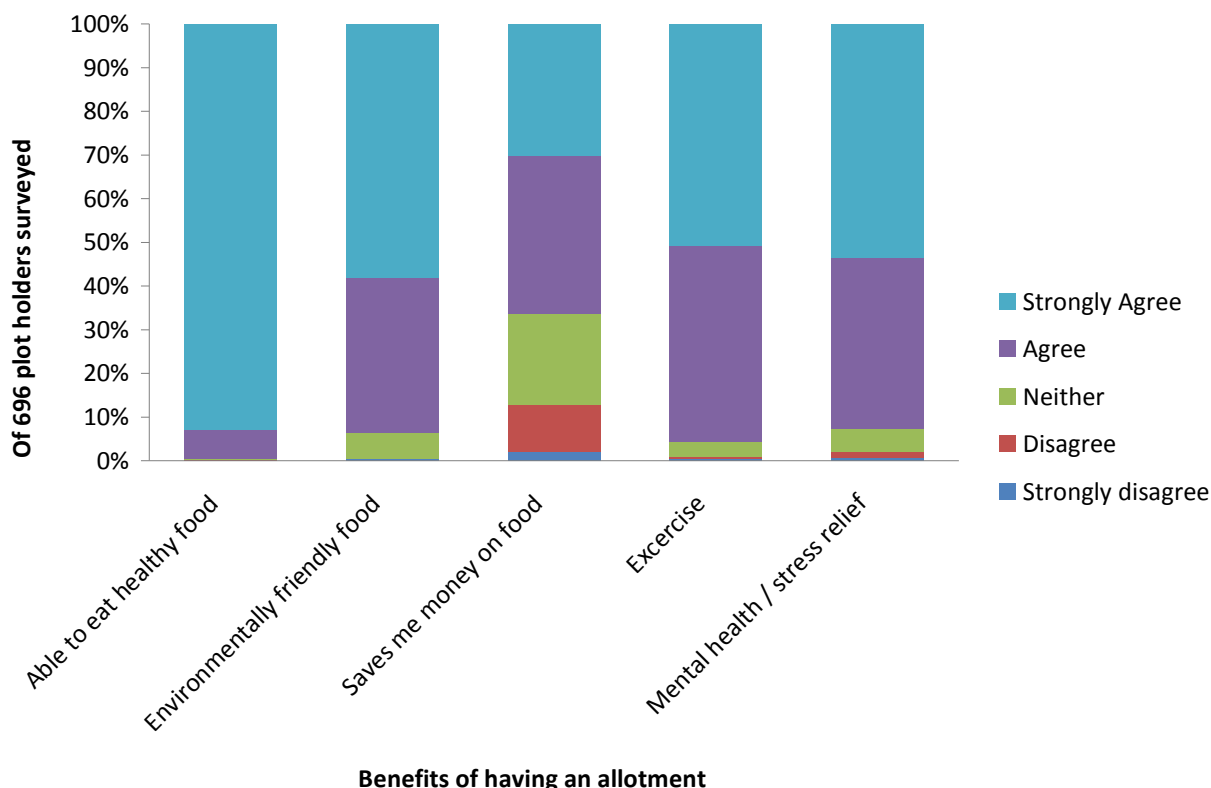
Summary of key findings / recommendations

- a) The process of developing this strategy has demonstrated that many people on allotments care passionately not just about their own plot but the wider allotment community (evidenced by the huge and detailed response to the consultation). This is an asset that this strategy seeks to recognise and build on. A **co-operative and participative approach** to delivering the strategy, overseeing the action plan and running the service will be needed going ahead if the ambitions set out in the strategy are to be achieved. The strategy makes recommendations around structures for governance and communications to facilitate this.
- b) **Allotments support healthy living** and provide a wide range of benefits (see following chart). A very significant number of plot holders surveyed as part of the strategy development process (n=696) agreed or strongly agreed with the statements that a benefit of having an allotment was to eat healthy food (98%) or for general exercise (96%). 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their allotment was about positive mental health and 72% agreed that they feel part of a community.

People viewed their allotment as having a powerful impact on their overall health and happiness with 74% giving this a score of eight or more out of ten. Overall, Allotmenters rated their health as better than the general population³. The survey of the community plots suggests that the main benefit derived by their service users / clients / volunteers is positive mental health. Allotmenters reported that while saving money overall on your food bill may not be the main benefit, an allotment did allow them to make food choices (eg organic or healthier food) that they wouldn't otherwise have been able to.

³ Comparing answers to the same question asked in the 2012 health counts survey

Chart: The benefits of having an allotment taken from the plot holders survey 2013



c) Allotment provision for both the population as a whole and for vulnerable groups in particular should be regarded as **an effective intervention for the prevention of ill health** and evidence gathered from the plot holders survey should be incorporated into the city’s Joint Strategic Needs Assessments and decision making about public health. More work should be done to understand how participation in food growing by certain groups could lead to savings in health / social care costs. The findings of the research and consultation work that inform this strategy should be shared widely.

“It would not be possible for me to put a price on the significance that having an allotment has had for me in terms of improvement to my physical and mental well-being. I am able to harvest a small but reasonably sized amount of produce from my small half plot-all delicious of-course! But the primary benefits are social and spiritual. I can't imagine my life now, without having an allotment.”
 Plot holders survey respondent 2013

d) The strategy recommends that work should be done to ensure that the allotment sites, alongside the main role of food growing, **play a role in conserving the biodiversity of the city**. The strategy process found evidence of good practice in terms of environmental sustainability around composting, minimising chemical use and planting schemes that benefit pollinators but more that can be done around management of water usage / rainwater harvesting. With the allotment service water bill coming to £25,000 a year⁴ and Brighton & Hove being identified by national government as an

⁴ It should also be noted that old infrastructure / leaky pipes are also a factor in this.

area of 'serious water stress' this is a key area for action. If successful the Biosphere Reserve bid will provide more opportunities for work on allotments and bio-diversity.

- e) The Allotment Strategy makes recommendations around **accessibility** and how to ensure that all sections of the community can participate. This includes specific promotional activity with communities of interest, work to ensure that suitable plots are available for those with limited mobility, a feasibility study on the possibility of 'fast tracking' applications from certain priority groups and support for community plots. The strategy also recommends **protecting the concession discount** of 25% on allotment rent.

- f) **Community plots.** There are 30 community plots independently run by volunteers or part of larger charities working with specific client groups, such as adults with learning disabilities, families from a deprived neighbourhood, people who have experienced homelessness or addiction. Community plots can be open to the public or for use on a referral basis. Community plots are a crucial part of ensuring that allotments are accessible for vulnerable residents. The strategy recommends that separate rules for community plots should be considered and that applications from community groups in areas of the city where there aren't



Carers Centre Allotment Plot at Craven Vale
(photograph courtesy of BHFP)

community plots and/or with communities of interest that are under-represented should be fast-tracked. The strategy recommends that the Food Partnership continues to work with community plots to support them to attract volunteers, to share information about how to apply for small grants and access resources and provide opportunities to network with others doing similar work. Where community plots run on an open access basis better links should be made with those on the waiting list.

- g) **Choice of plot size.** Evidence from the strategy development process suggests that most people (80%) are happy with their current plot size however there was overwhelming support for there to be a choice of plot sizes. The strategy therefore recommends a change from the current policy of only letting half plots and suggests mechanisms for how this should be managed. This will include options for full plots (250m²) and half plots (125m²) for both those joining the waiting list and those currently growing. The strategy also recommends that smaller **individual beds are introduced** to respond to the demand for smaller individual plots. Action will be taken to ensure that there is balance of plot sizes, clear mechanisms for changing size and that people are well informed about the time commitments involved in different options.



Photo: E. Guthridge

- h) **Waiting list: better management.** As part of the strategy development, in October 2013, people on the waiting list were asked to reconfirm that they still wanted

an allotment to better gauge the real size of the waiting list and at the same time to clean up the list so it would be a more effective tool for lettings. The number actually waiting for an allotment is much lower than previously thought, approximately 1,000 people (rather than 2,200) although this figure does not take into account latent demand for allotments, ie the people who did not join because the waiting list for that site was closed, or did not bother to apply because they were told they would have to wait several years. A yearly update to check that you want to remain on the waiting list was considered to be a good idea by 96% of the 696 people on the waiting list that answered this survey question and 98% of them said they would also like to be kept informed of their position on the waiting list. It is recommended that when people apply for a plot and when they are updated on their waiting list position, they should be told if there is any spare capacity at any other sites in the city.

There should be greater involvement of and opportunities for people on waiting lists (training, information about site open days, and co-working opportunities). More should be done to ensure that people have excellent information about the time different size plots require and the alternative options for food growing before they decide to join the list. It is recommended that an annual report on the time people are waiting for an allotment is produced in order to understand demand as well as information on the total number of people on the waiting list. In order to facilitate better management of and greater engagement with the waiting list it is recommended that a small one off non-refundable charge is made for joining the list.

- i) **Empty plots.** Based on figures from November 2013, there are over 400 un-let plots, representing an annual lost income of around £15,000 as well as causing frustration to both plot holders and those on the waiting list. While it is recognised that some plots will inevitably remain vacant whilst they are in the process of being let, it is recommended that this figure is reduced via streamlining the lettings process including improved ICT systems; and supporting site representatives to get better in managing lettings.
- j) **New plot holders** in particular need better training and information about what to do when they get started. A new plot holders information pack and opportunities to be mentored by more experienced growers should be introduced. Often plots are in disrepair when inexperienced people take them on. Far too often people quickly lose interest or are overwhelmed by how much work is needed in the first six months and don't work their plot leaving the space to become even more overgrown. Once plots are overgrown they are harder to let and harder to cultivate; and spread weed seeds to other nearby allotments. New plot holders said they wanted more information about what they should do first, where to borrow tools and buy basic equipment, opportunities for learning before they got given their plot (last year on the waiting list) and the chance to learn from more experienced allotmentees. The **new plot holders probationary period** should be used more effectively; for example if people are coming up regularly and working hard then those doing the inspections shouldn't be too strict about cultivation percentages and weed notices (as this caused stress) but if people haven't come up at all in the first three months get them off quickly and a new person on.

k) While the clearest need for **information and training** is for new plot holders the strategy also recognises that more can be done to support all allotmenters to become better growers for example increasing the number of people who grow year round (thereby increasing the amount of food produced) and supporting environmentally friendly growing practices. Regular communication from the Allotment Federation about opportunities to take part in learning, sharing of good practice information as well as providing inspiration and encouragement should continue.

“When you first get a plot you get sent a list of rules of all the things you shouldn't do but no-one tells you what you should do!”

Plot holders survey respondent 2013

- l) Allotmenters already contribute thousands of hours each year in **volunteer time** to help run allotments. Volunteers run the Allotment Federation and Site Associations, managing lettings and cultivation notices (Site Reps) and are used for tidy up days and routine maintenance at some sites. The strategy recommends providing greater **clarity on the role of Site Reps**, establishing mechanisms by which these roles are elected and improving the training and support available to them to ensure that there is consistency and fairness across the service. The strategy also recommends increasing the opportunities for people who want to volunteer for example helping with open days, mentoring new plot holders or taking part in routine maintenance. Methods for ensuring that volunteers are supported will need to be introduced to prevent 'burn out'.
- m) This strategy seeks to **work towards a self-sustaining and efficiently run service that keeps down costs for both tenants and the council**. In the current financial situation the council may have to make allotments, along with many other services, self-financing. In 2013 the council compared the cost of rent for their allotments with elsewhere in the country and Brighton & Hove was roughly in the middle. The strategy recommends that rent rises should be minimised as far as possible and other avenues explored for reducing costs and generating revenue. There was a consensus that work can be done to improve the **efficiency and effectiveness** of the service. For example introducing methods of electronic communications and annual direct debit payments freeing up staff time currently spent on invoice renewal letters. The use of ICT in the service needs to be reviewed in order to improve efficiency. The strategy recommends that **additional sources of revenue are explored**, especially services which would benefit plot holders as well as generate income for example deliveries of woodchip or mulches and construction of sheds or raised beds. **Grants / sponsorship** for certain pieces of work (eg advice around water management) will also be sought.

While **concessions** are an important strand of work to ensure accessibility the annual costs (in terms of reduced rental income) is £9,700. The strategy recommends that the option to turn down a concession if this is not needed should be promoted. The strategy recommends that there should be an option to pay a higher rent for those on higher incomes. This should be offered on a voluntary (honesty) system; it should be simple to administer; and it should be clear where the money is going, eg to the allotment improvement fund (for site improvements) or to continue to offer subsidised allotments to those on concessions.

Longer term plans include further work to explore if allotments save money on health care in the city particularly for older people and those with mental or physical health conditions and therefore there is an argument for exploring if concessions for

vulnerable groups could be funded via the public health budget (while recognising that these budgets are also under pressure).

- n) Looking to the longer term, there are also recommendations around more **self-management** on site - not just as a way of saving money but also of strengthening community involvement and participation. There is the potential to offer a more responsive and efficient service for less money than if this is provided by the council. For example, a site association volunteer could replace a broken padlock with a new one supplied by the council rather than calling out the maintenance team. A further step would be to pilot 'self-



management' as happens on some allotment sites in other parts of the country. This would mean that the budget and responsibility for running the site would be passed to an association or similar body on the site. At least one (hopefully more) site will pilot self management in the next five years to explore the benefits / risks and potential savings in this approach. While managing the service on a citywide level makes sense in terms of billing and administration sites across the city vary considerably and the strategy recommends that there is more flexibility on how decisions are taken at a site level for example some flexibility around rules.

- o) There is considerable difference across the city ranging from little or no communication and involvement at a site level to site associations that run shops, organise open days and help with running the site. The strategy recommends that all sites are encouraged to undertake activities to **encourage on site participation**. The allotment development fund (managed by BHAF) can be used to invest in notice boards or improve site infrastructure to aid this and, from 2014, the fund can be used to help establish **more site associations**. A stronger sense of community on site was felt to be an important element in addressing problems of theft and vandalism. Site open days are recommended as a way for potential plot holders to find out about what is involved and for co-workers and those who want help with their plot to meet. Allotmenters wanted ways to swap and share equipment and materials and these will be established. At a citywide level the Allotment Federation will continue to work to ensure that it is able to engage with its members in a variety of formats (online and in person).

A copy of the full strategy will be available from www.bhaf.org.uk from 30 March 2014. Before that date, please email bfaf.contact@gmail.com.