

London Borough of Hillingdon Joint Allotment Strategy

**LONDON BOROUGH OF HILLINGDON
JOINT ALLOTMENT STRATEGY
2003 – 2008**

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PART I – MEMBERS & PUBLIC (INCLUDING THE PRESS)

London Borough of Hillingdon Joint Allotment Strategy

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The partnership wishes to acknowledge its debt to Bristol City Council for inspiration from their Allotment Strategy.

Introduction by the Cabinet Lead, Environment

The allotment movement in Hillingdon is a long established one, traditionally based on pleasure and necessity.

Allotments provision has always been incumbent upon the Council, to designate and maintain sites for the growing needs of families. The social gains from local participation and community involvement have been ongoing, although not always acknowledged. In recent years the health benefits of fresh food and gentle exercise have come to the fore.

The Council recognises its obligation to provide well-kept allotment sites in all parts of the borough. We will encourage all residents to avail themselves of this all year round leisure amenity, either actively for exercise and food production, or passively by appreciating that allotments are a valuable green space resource.

I am delighted to commend this Strategy to you.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Allotment gardening provides a wide range of benefits to communities and the environment. Allotments are not just important for good and low cost food production, although this is still important. They provide a valuable recreational opportunity involving healthy activity and social contacts – 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 great interest shown by allotment holders and other people during consultation over this Strategy shows that allotment gardening is cherished and can be a distinctive part of Hillingdon's Local Agenda 21.

1.3 Some of Hillingdon's allotment sites are well utilised and flourishing. However, many of the allotments are in a poor state, under-used and in decline.

1.4 Allotments have evolved through a rich and varied history of social and economic change which has been accompanied by a succession of legislative reforms that date back to the Enclosure Act of 1845.

1.5 The resulting legislation, collectively known as the Allotment Acts, is in some ways inadequate for current needs but it will remain pertinent to allotment administration and provision for some time to come, until it is revised.

1.6 London Borough of Hillingdon will continue to provide and promote allotments to its charge payers not only because of the statutory requirement but because:

- Allotment gardening makes a valuable contribution to the Borough's sustainability by providing health, social, economic and environmental benefits;
- Allotments are an important leisure and recreational facility;
- Well-kept allotment sites are of visual benefit to the neighbourhood

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 and to widen the range of people using them for health, economic and social benefits.**

2 PURPOSE OF STRATEGY

2.1 The Allotment Strategy has been drafted in partnership with Hillingdon Allotment and Horticultural Federation, Healthy Hillingdon and Groundwork Thames Valley for the Borough's allotments managed by the Green Spaces team [i.e. directly managed sites and sites under self-management but not for the small area of privately owned allotments]. The Strategy will:

- Set standards for the provision of allotments in Hillingdon
- Increase the uptake of allotments
- Improve the standard of service provision
- Increase and promote the benefits derived from allotments, with particular emphasis on the educational benefits
- Improve the financial position of the service

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

- Good access, good security, well maintained haulage ways and pathways, adequate water provision, sufficient storage facilities and toilets where practical, good facilities, adequate site drainage and freedom from neglected plots
- Opportunities and encouragement to individuals and communities wishing to be involved in the cultivation of allotments
- Efficient and effective allotment administration
- Effective and appropriate allocation of resources
- Fair, open and equitable treatment and safe tenure
- Opportunities for developing gardening skills
- Encouragement and support to sites to develop self-management
- Reasonable charges and rents
- Capitalisation on the educational benefits of allotments-

3 AIM ONE: PROVIDING ENOUGH ALLOTMENTS

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 300 square yards [so for example, two people each renting 150 square yard 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 Borough owns and manages 1075 plots in 26 allotment sites and a further 729 plots in 11 sites are self-managed: a total of 1804 plots in 37 sites.

3.3 In reviewing the amount and distribution of allotment provision, the main considerations are:

- There is no recognised national quantitative standard for allotment provision. Local standards are needed and these will be 7 plots per thousand population and no more than $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from residential locations by foot and these standards will be subject to review after the first year. Obvious gaps appear to be in Hayes Town and Harlington and we will seek to secure appropriate provision in these areas of deficiency.
- The ability to respond to realistic possibilities for future change and growth in the need for allotments should be retained.
- Provision standards cannot be applied mechanically. Even when standards are agreed, in examining the status of any individual site [or possible new site] local considerations and other policy frameworks must play a big part.
- The national average of allotment provision is 6.3 plots per thousand population. Hillingdon has 7.2 plots per thousand population [Bristol has 11.9, Sheffield has 6.7, Liverpool 4.2]. About 45% of Hillingdon’s managed plots are occupied, leaving 591 full size plot equivalents – over 16 hectares – uncultivated. A similar proportion of self-managed plots is vacant. Usage has been declining locally by about 1% per annum, in contrast with a national decline of about 10%.
- The distribution of allotments in Hillingdon is not even and does not reflect demand. Some areas have well-populated sites, notably the northern part of the borough and there are localised areas of shortage. Other wards and localities have sites with very low occupancy; some are partly or completely derelict.

3.4 The partnership proposes that the borough will:-

- 3.4.1 retain a level of allotment provision significantly above the current national average and where possible, no lower than 7 plots per 1000 population, with plots available no further than three-quarters of a mile by foot from any residential location.
- 3.4.2 examine if local deficiencies in allotment provision can be made up from existing open space [clearly the impact on existing and alternative uses and landscapes will have to be taken into account].
- 3.4.3 examine alternative uses for sites or parts of sites where supply seriously exceeds uptake, provided:
- There is consultation with representatives of the allotment movement as well as the existing tenants and the local impact and local public opinion are considered
 - There are no tenants on the site/section of the site, or suitable alternatives can be found within the provision criteria given above.
 - Loss of the whole or part of the site would not lead to under provision against these criteria.
- 3.4.4 In addition, where a better alternative location can be offered and if tenants are in favour of moving, alternative uses for existing sites [even where demand and supply are matched] could be considered.
- 3.4.5 When examining alternative uses to consider in particular:
- The potential for temporary and reversible uses, e.g. grazing, open space etc
 - The potential for generating income for reinvestment in allotment provision or facilities.
 - Local consultation and discussion with the Allotment Federation [where detailed plans for the sale of allotment land to generate income for reinvestment are considered] must be undertaken before schemes are submitted to the Council for approval for disposal. The aim will be to raise a minimum of £1M for the implementation of the Allotments Strategy during the 5-year period.
- 3.5 These proposals are set within the overall framework and operation of the Green Spaces Strategy; the Borough's planning policies, including the U.D.P.; the Capital Investment Strategy and Asset Management Plans; government guidelines and other relevant local strategies [e.g. Healthy Hillingdon, Local Agenda 21, Hillingdon Biodiversity Action Plan].

4. AIM TWO: PROMOTING ALLOTMENT USE

4.1 The use of allotments has been in decline for many years.

4.2 Market research and a local survey of existing plot-holders has identified the main barriers and deterrents to allotment uptake and continued cultivation. These are:

- The poor condition of allotments, particularly
 - overgrown plots, which spread weed over adjacent plots, create a sense of dereliction and demand hard and prolonged work to convert into productive sites
 - poor security [fencing, gates etc]
 - poor condition of paths, car parking provision, water supply and shelter
- the poor quality of service and customer care, due to the continual low budget provision for allotments maintenance
- plots being too large for some tenants

4.3 Conventional promotional work would be almost pointless without improvement to the product. Having recognised this, there are good reasons to promote as well as reinvest in the product:

- the demographics of allotment users suggest a need to reach out to new groups of users whilst continuing to satisfy existing users. This needs to build recognition of the range of benefits and the diversity of possible approaches to allotment cultivation which are possible, i.e. not just vegetable growing but bee-keeping, poultry husbandry, fruit and flower production and lawn areas if desired
- the high early drop-out rate shows that new users need helpful support
- “food links” – developing the organisation infrastructure to supply co-operative purchasing, working and distribution of produce – would enable more flexible involvement in allotment gardening, taking into account that the main reason for non-use is lack of time.

4.4 The partnership proposes that the Borough will:-

4.4.1 retain existing and attract new users by investing a minimum of £1 million in improvements to allotment sites over the next five years, financed by suitable disposals of disused allotment land. This will be used to ensure that sites have effective fencing and gateways, adequate car parking, adequate and easy to use water supply, main access ways in good condition, particular facilities for particular needs [e.g. plots suitable for those with disabilities, including suitable access to sites and buildings for them and toilets, particularly for women].

4.4.2 retain existing and attract new users it will be necessary to increase revenue provision from its present level of £26,500 [£716 per site] to allow for maintenance of new capital items and an increase in the standard of service including:

- control of weeds on vacant plots and headlands of sites
- good customer service [see Aim Three – Good Administration]
- developing the role of site representatives at all sites, with appropriate support and recognition
- supporting developments in co-operative purchasing and working

4.4.3 retain existing and attract new users by continuing the existing annual competition arrangements, with the subsequent presentation evening.

4.4.4 attract new users by:

- keeping some reserve plots ready for occupation
- offering attractive financial terms
- promotions targeted to communities, including schools and adult education use and emphasising benefits [e.g. health, social and low-cost advantages]

A Marketing and Publicity Strategy drawn up by the partnership will involve both the Borough and partners in implementing targeted promotion to potential users. This will help reap the full benefit from capital improvements to sites.

4.5 Although simply halting the decline in plot take-up over recent years will be an achievement [since low occupancy sites are less attractive to newcomers than well-used ones] it is important not to forget the health and community building benefits from the regeneration of sites. Every new plot let will improve the health of the tenant's family and community, as well as just the tenant and will support the community of allotment holders on each site.

4.5.1 It is hard to predict the impact of these measures and set targets for occupation, partly because it is linked to the success of a reinvestment programme which may take some time to bear fruit, partly because there is no useful precedent. The minimum target would be for an additional 100 plots let which is a 15% increase with direct benefits to at least 500 more people. This should move Hillingdon up the league table of London Boroughs, where some [Richmond, Barnet, Redbridge] have over 90% of plots let, several [Bromley, Croydon, Enfield, Kingston, Sutton] have over 80% of plots let and few, including Hillingdon, have 45% of plots let. Figures for neighbouring boroughs are Hounslow 57%, Ealing 73%, Harrow 70% while Slough has 58% occupancy. This would be linked to a constructive rationalisation programme which will further increase the uptake of vacant plots, resulting in more attractive and viable sites.

5. AIM THREE: IMPROVE STANDARD OF SERVICE PROVISION

- 5.1 The need to improve administrative processes is clear and will be subject to annual review, to achieve customer satisfaction. There will also be, annually in October, a joint review of progress with partners against the whole strategy which will be reported to Council and the Federation.
- 5.2 Improvements have been made over the last two years. Customer service has improved since the set up of the Customer Contact Centre [tel: 01895 556000] to make the Council more responsive. A direct call to 01895 250456 is the best way to contact the officer responsible for allotments. A series of practical improvements has been introduced, including:
- A 2-yearly review of allotment rents and conditions of tenancy, to ensure they give value for money; the Federation will be involved in this review
 - Better communication with Site Secretaries, including them being 'copied in' regarding take-up and lapses of tenancies
 - Better discounts, resulting from a review of the charging policy to ascertain the relevancy of charges and concession arrangements.
 - Improved systems for record management
 - The production of an allotments leaflet
 - The appointment of an Allotments Project Officer, funded by Healthy Hillingdon, which has helped to raise the profile of allotments
- 5.3 The Council proposes:
- 5.3.1 To investigate complaints, striving to achieve responsive and communicative outcomes.
- 5.3.2 To finalise and adopt a quality assurance system, possibly securing accreditation under ISO9002.
- 5.3.3 To investigate, with the Federation, the provision of an Allotments Promotion Officer, to be funded from external sources.
- 5.3.4 To take advantage of the availability of a computerised geographic information system in the borough, to digitise allotment records with links to rents receivable/invoicing and financial systems, subject to detailed feasibility work.
- 5.3.5 To ensure that adequate staff provision is made to run the service and ensure the strategy is effectively implemented.

- 5.3.6 To provide options for increased self-management, in particular the opportunity to take full responsibility for administration, rent collection and site works, on peppercorn lease terms. From discussions during the preparation of this strategy it is clear that there would be a need to bring the sites into a good condition first. For those associations not wishing to adopt full self-management, an agreement known as Scheme A could be offered on broadly the same basis as at present but with improvements to detailed arrangements; this is already available and in operation at two sites. The Council must ensure that all allotments, including self-managed sites, are managed with probity, equity and equality and therefore agreements will include appropriate requirements, including making appropriate records available, annually.
- 5.3.7 To support and develop the representative and site management role of site representatives at all sites, including consideration of remuneration for out of pocket costs incurred.
- 5.3.8 To improve its network of contacts in the allotment movement through the Allotment Federation and regular meetings with site representatives and tenants and in particular to consult these during the implementation of the Strategy and to work closely with key partners [Groundwork Thames Valley, Healthy Hillingdon, London Wildlife Trust].
- 5.3.9 To seek out good practice from other progressive and successful local authorities.
- 5.3.10 To ensure that the Green Spaces team works closely with other Council departments, resulting in a cohesive implementation of functions.

6 AIM FOUR: ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

- 6.1 Allotments provide a valuable network of green spaces across the Borough. This is of particular importance in areas of the borough that are densely developed and where houses have small gardens and the parks are of a limited size. However, the security needs of allotments mean that they cannot fully substitute for public open space. However ways to increase the visual amenity of sites should be developed/explored, e.g. ornamental tree-planting, better appearance etc.
- 6.2 The importance of allotments as wildlife habitats and their strategic role as wildlife corridors and buffers to more important wildlife sites is already recognised. However, much of their value has arisen from neglect not decision. As a result, the potential wildlife value is less than could be achieved, the benefits of limited public access are not capitalised on and sites can look derelict with problems created for the remaining users.
- 6.3 There is a very significant opportunity to develop wildlife value in some areas of allotment land with no realistic prospect of coming back into use. These sites are frequently prominent in the local landscape and great visual benefits can be anticipated as well. Conversely, in some places wildlife value has developed to the detriment of allotment provision or other potential uses and careful evaluation of options may be needed.
- 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 Within the cultivated area of allotments, principles of sustainable gardening are relevant. The Council has commitments to reducing pesticide use and use of non-renewable resources. This will be approached by persuasion, not coercion - allotment holders do not want to be burdened with restrictions and regulation. Water-conserving measures and composting will be encouraged, as will a responsible attitude towards the disposal of waste.
- 6.6 **The Council will:**
- 6.6.1 encourage and [where possible] support good environmental practice including organic alternatives to fertilisers and pesticides. This will include technical advice and assistance with composting techniques and organisation [e.g. communal composting]

- 6.6.2 seek to develop face to face support and demonstration projects, drawing where possible on the expertise already in the allotment movement [this already happens informally to a great extent in allotment sites but the potential for outreach and off-site demonstrations has hardly been explored]
- 6.6.3 achieve better management of existing natural features and also the creation of new wildlife habitats where a conscious decision has been taken to manage areas of unused allotment land for wildlife. This will usually involve a change of designation to Open Space, given the difficulty of returning a site to allotment use. Where possible, wildlife management will be in partnership with wildlife groups.

7 AIM FIVE: PROVIDING ENOUGH RESOURCES

CAPITAL

- 7.1 Throughout the preparation of this Strategy, public consultation through the Allotments Initiative has highlighted the need not only to provide enough allotments but to upgrade them.
- 7.2 *Aim One: Providing Enough Allotments* describes how surplus sites can be identified for sale and reinvestment. *Aim Two: Promoting Allotment Use* proposes reinvesting a minimum of £1 million raised by this process in upgrading remaining sites [or in providing new sites]. The programming of reinvestment depends on the rate of progress in identifying and selling surplus land but it is anticipated that the receipts for allotment reinvestment will flow at £0.25 million per annum.

REVENUE: COST

- 7.3 All this would be a poor investment if not sustained. During consultation the allotment movement emphasised that once on an improved physical and administrative footing, the service must be maintained and not allowed to drift back into dereliction. Their suggestion in 5.3.3 is that an officer be appointed from external funding sources but until that is achieved there will be a need for adequate staff provision to run the service and ensure the Strategy is effectively implemented.
- 7.4 Revenue costs will be increased by a higher level of site care, particularly weed control of empty plots. The higher the occupancy rate, the lower the impact of this. Costs would be further contained by the "caretaking" arrangements with site representatives described in *Aim Two: Promoting Allotment Use*.
- 7.5 For a period, the increase in revenue costs would be partly offset by substitution of capital investment [for example, a new robust fence needs less running repairs]. Staff costs will rise by approximately £20k per annum but we will be seeking external funding so there will be no budget implications. It is anticipated that there may be an increase in revenue costs initially but this should progressively reduce as the Strategy becomes more fully implemented.

REVENUE: INCOME

- 7.6 *Aim Two: Promoting Allotment Use* proposes targets for an increase in use of 15% over five years. This would result in an increase in occupancy rates, although with conversion of some allotments to other uses [itself balanced by some new sites in under provided areas] the rate would be even higher. Income at current real rent levels would increase by £1.0k per annum.

7.7 The nearer the overall service can be to breaking even, the less vulnerable it will be to any future cuts. Ideally, allotments could reach revenue break-even, with no net call on subsidy. If so, they could be established as a trading account [perhaps at a later stage transferring the Council's overall interest to a Trust]. This would also provide powerful motivation for staff and partners to sustain effective financial performance.

7.8 It will be reasonable to consider options to move nearer to [or achieve] revenue break-even once the basic thrust of this strategy – to improve the condition of allotments and drive up occupancy – has been achieved. Options can include:

- Putting aside some money from site disposals as an endowment fund
- Reviewing rents and/or concession arrangements [clearly though not at the expense of a drop off in uptake]

7.9 Other opportunities for income generation are emerging [for example, the Lottery's New Opportunities Fund could fund health-related promotions and community allotment initiatives] but the likely value is difficult to assess and should not be regarded as core funding.

8. SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS

AIM ONE: PROVIDING ENOUGH ALLOTMENTS

TARGET	TASK/ACTION	BY
Retain at least 7 plots per 1000 population in any Area, with sites no further than $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from residential locations by foot	Undertake study with Federation to see if local deficiencies can be made up from existing open space, where feasible and appropriate and to consider alternatives.	April 2003
Consider alternative uses where there is serious excess of supply	Property review followed by detailed consultations on emerging proposals with the allotment movement	April 2003

AIM TWO: PROMOTING ALLOTMENT USE

TARGET	TASK/ACTION	BY
<u>Retain existing and attract new users, with target of 15% increase by 2007</u>	Invest up to £1 million in improvements to sites, financed from property disposals, with Federation.	April 2007
	Improve the quality of service, including controlling weeds on vacant plots, developing role of site representative, supporting developments in co-operative purchasing and working	April 2004
	Certain sites to be targeted for promotion and support	April 2003
	Keep reserved plots ready for use	April 2003
	Promotional campaigns N.B. work with Allotment Federation and with site representativeness to achieve the above	April 2003

AIM THREE: IMPROVE THE STANDARD OF SERVICE PROVISION

TARGET	TASK/ACTION	BY
Provide quality assured system	Improve customer service Achieve ISO9002 accreditation	April 2003 April 2004
Provide adequate resource to deliver commitment	Employ additional officer to promote allotments Adopt GIS [subject to detailed feasibility] or dedicated allotment computer system	April 2004 April 2005
Encourage more sites to take on self-management	Complete agreements for newly-devolved sites	April 2004
Develop and support role of site representative as significant part of management process	Continue valuing a forum for Site Representatives and Allotment Officers Improve arrangements for maintenance of empty plots via site reps where possible	April 2003 April 2004
Review Strategy	Measure progress against the Strategy in an annual joint review to be prepared in time for a report to be provided for the Federation A.G.M. in November and the Council	Annually in October

AIM FOUR: ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

TARGET	TASK/ACTION	BY
Encourage and support sustainable gardening methods	Provide technical information and advice	April 2003
	Investigate feasibility of communal composting projects	April 2005
	Develop a programme of education and training on allotment growing for new and current plot holders in conjunction with Adult Education service [subject to funding]	April 2003
Manage wildlife features better	Identify sections of sites which are to remain under wildlife management: transfer status, prepare and institute management plans	April 2006

AIM FIVE: PROVIDING ENOUGH RESOURCES

TARGET	TASK/ACTION	BY
Invest £1 million over 5 years	Property review to achieve disposals [see Aim One]	April 2007
Long term balance of income and expenditure	Increases in uptake, reductions in vacant land [see Aims One and Two]	April 2007
	Develop self-managed site maintenance arrangements with site representatives and others [see Aim Two]	April 2007
	Adopt GIS subject to feasibility confirmation that this will allow savings in administrative overheads	April 2005
	Continue 2-yearly review of rent levels and concession arrangements	Sept 2004 and Sept 2006
	Explore other funding sources for proposed initiatives e.g. New Opportunities Fund	Ongoing
Investigate setting up a trust fund	To ensure that sufficient money is retained in the long term budget to ensure continued provision for allotments	April 2008