A Neglected Asset:
Allotments in Birmingham

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Key Findings

This Birmingham study highlights four issues, which may well have a more general application to the allotment movement across the UK.

- Firstly, allotments are becoming a more egalitarian community with a much greater engagement of women, non-pensioner age groups and ethnic minorities. They are increasingly sites of social cohesion, where people from all different backgrounds and ages meet up.
- Secondly, we have shown that allotment plot-holders produce a significant volume of fresh potatoes, vegetables and fruit each year. Our findings question the exaggerated claims for food production of some studies, but on average at least 100 kg of fresh food is harvested on plots across the allotment estate.
- Thirdly, our study highlights the diverse benefits which plot-holders gain from the cultivation of their allotment and in particular the physical and mental health benefits. Public health officials and GPs should recognise this in their work while councils should give a higher profile to allotments in their environmental and 'green spaces' policies.
- Fourthly, allotments have potential to develop as local community hubs. Council cutbacks create real pressures on the allotment community. Restrictions on council budgets are likely to stay for the foreseeable future. A shift in the cultural outlook of the allotment movement with an outward-looking drive to attract funds from other sources and present allotments as an integral element of their local community looks the most promising way forward.

1. The Study

"It's not an 'old men in sheds' type of allotment" Kate tells me when we visit West Heath allotment, a site with fifty plots on the southern edge of Birmingham, near the former Longbridge car plant. She is the committee secretary. "The majority of our tenants are employed or run their own businesses, while a third are retired. We have a lot of couples and families who work the plots together. We are a very diverse site with people of all ages and abilities from different backgrounds. We have people from Zimbabwe, Bosnia, Jamaica and around the UK, all brought together through the love of growing. People on our site love experimenting with new ways of growing, we've had Hügelkultur, double dig, no dig, aquaponics, growing potatoes in straw, growing carrots in Pringles tins to name a few. After all, allotmenteers are the original up-cyclers!"
Dave, a plot holder for many years, tells me he grows enough vegetables on his small plot to feed his kids and grandkids for the year when they come around for Sunday lunch. Karl, the site construction expert shows me how he uses pallets and water pipes to make fantastic poly-tunnels. Petrine uses her plot to grow callaloo, okra, sweet potatoes and yams alongside the usual potatoes, peas, beans etc. The committee chair Kerry grows wonderful strawberries in narrow raised beds. She tells me "the site isn't just about growing; it is about community and improving people's well-being, physically, mentally, and socially. We would be lost without it." It reflects the changing picture of life across Birmingham's 113 allotment sites.

This study is based on evidence collected directly from plot-holders themselves and site secretaries and thus gives a clear picture of the changing profile and activity of allotment tenants. It is designed to create a firm evidence base to assess the value and benefits of allotments for citizens; for the City

Council as the land-owner; and also for other stake-holders such as Birmingham-based health trusts, GP services, and agencies and organisations with an interest in the social and economic well-being of Birmingham citizens. This research was organised in collaboration with the Birmingham District Allotment Confederation (BDAC), which has facilitated collecting information directly from sites and individual plot-holders. Given the size, scope and robustness of the study our hope is that it will be of interest to national players such as the National Allotment Society and indeed the relevant national government departments, particularly the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. There may even be interest at international level.
The study addresses several issues.

- It examines the profile of plot-holders, how long they have been tenants, the amount of time they spend on their allotment, their age and background.
- It assesses the benefits of having an allotment in terms of what food is grown on the plot and estimated food volumes.
- It enquires about the contribution that having an allotment makes to the physical and mental well-being of plot-holders.
- It tests a model and methodology for this kind of locally based assessment, which could be replicated in other towns and cities across the UK.
- It considers the issues for those volunteers currently engaged in managing allotments at site level at a time when, in Birmingham as elsewhere, the local authority struggles to maintain its traditional level of support and explores how the allotment community can adopt a more outward-looking profile
- It concludes with a set of recommendations on how the benefits of allotments can be extended and current shortcomings addressed.

2. Background

Allotments have been an under-stated feature of Britain's urban life for many decades. They are protected by various acts of parliament that date back to the early 20th century. The vast majority of allotment sites are located on public land owned by local councils. Each allotment site is divided into multiple plots and rented at a generally low annual cost to individual plot-holders. A key role on each site is played by the allotment committee: a group of plot-holders who give their time voluntarily to run, maintain and oversee the smooth running of the allotment site and embody the self-organising culture of allotment life.

Allotment plot provision in the UK grew after the First World War providing a source of both food and outdoor activity for urban working class communities living in cramped, often squalid, housing. During the Second World War the government emphasised their important contribution to the country's food security with its 'Dig for Victory' publicity campaigns and numbers peaked in 1950. Post-war, with gradual housing improvements and more people having their own gardens, allotment usage declined with approximately 1.5 million plots falling to around 300,000 in the late 1990s.[1]

[1] David Crouch and Colin Ward. The Allotment. 2023 Little Toller Books

However, recent years have seen a revival of interest. A recent Greenpeace freedom of information request revealed that currently over 150,000 people are on allotment waiting lists across the country, up 81% from 12 years ago.[2] A BBC Today programme item on 13 October 2023 highlighted the renewed interest in allotment gardening; emphasised the community dimensions, the changing demographics – "not just a retirees' playground"; and the joy of growing and learning new skills and things about nature. An increasing awareness of the realities of climate change and global warming, along with the importance of food security and healthy living are resulting in a burgeoning interest in the potential of allotments and community gardening more generally.

The Broader Context.

This surge of interest is linked to a wider food policy movement evolving across the UK. Sustainable Food Places[3] brings together pioneering food partnerships from towns and cities that are driving innovation and best practice on all aspects of healthy and sustainable food. In Glasgow a Food Policy Partnership[4] is drawing together major public sector bodies alongside small community organisations in a coordinated drive to create a food system that is fairer, more resilient and environmentally sustainable. There are also similar policy initiatives in Bristol and Middlesbrough while Birmingham has launched its food system strategy designed to create a sustainable, healthy and thriving food system.

The increasing interest in urban agriculture and allotment gardens is not restricted to the UK. There is a growing urban agriculture movement in its various forms across Europe – from Portugal to Prague, Berlin to Barcelona, Montpellier to Milan. The latter has taken the policy lead with its Urban Food Policy Pact.[5] The Pact was signed on the 15 October 2015 by more than 100 city mayors and now has 270 signatories from cities across the globe. It is designed as a working tool for cities, with its Framework for Action listing thirty-seven recommended actions, clustered in six categories. For each recommended action there are specific indicators to monitor progress in implementing the Pact, while Pact Awards offer practical examples of the food policies that cities are implementing in each of the six pact categories.

Its declaration illustrates the breadth of vision that informs the contemporary urban agriculture movement of which allotments are such a central part. The focus extends well beyond simple food production. "..urban agriculture gardens are important green spaces and offer a myriad of environmental, economic and social benefits such as providing fresh products and plants as well as contributing to a sense of community and connection to the environment, providing an opportunity for satisfying labour and improving the well-being of residents and neighbourhoods." Birmingham is twinned with Milan; has worked closely with them through the Eurocities Association; and is a

[2] Damien Gayle. Waiting list for allotments in England almost doubles in 12 years. The Guardian 11 October 2023

[3] https://www.sustainablefoodplaces.org/about/what-are-sustainable-food-places/

[4] Good Food for All in Glasgow: An Interim Assessment of the Glasgow City Food Plan 306031.pdf (gla.ac.uk)

[5] https://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/

signatory to the Food Pact. This report explores how its allotments live up to the aspirations set out in the Milan declaration.

The Birmingham Allotment Picture

In England there is no set standard size for allotments but the most common plot is around 250 square metres. Birmingham has 255.46 hectares (631acres) of allotment land that provide around 7,300 plots. Birmingham allotments have four distinct size categories –mini, small, standard and large – with a different annual rent, 2024 rates shown, attached to each.

- Mini Plot £ 60.00 £32.00*
- Small Plots £ 74.00 £39.00*
- Standard Plot £110.00 £57.00*
- Large Plot £134.00 £69.00*
- Raised beds £ 18.00 £11.00*

* For over 65s rent is discounted

Together, the allotment estate of 113 sites is distributed across the city[6]. Aside from the city centre constituency of Ladywood, which has just a single site, the geographical distribution of allotments is fairly evenly shared. Across the city's 10 parliamentary constituencies, each has between nine to eighteen sites: Edgbaston 11; Erdington 11; Hodge Hill 14; Hall Green 10; Ladywood 1; Northfield 9; Perry Barr 12; Selly Oak 18; Sutton Coldfield 12; Yardley 15. The precise number of plots fluctuates as sites increase the number of half and mini plots. With many plots involving partners, other family members and friends, it is a reasonable assumption that well in excess of 12,000 people are regularly engaged in allotment activity.

Methods used in the study

This study collected information directly from both allotment users and the committee secretaries overseeing the sites. To this end, the study worked closely throughout with the Birmingham District Allotments Confederation (BDAC). A survey questionnaire was developed which was piloted with a number of plot-holders and discussed with BDAC. The questionnaire was hosted on the BDAC web-site and open to all plot-holders throughout the city. This was supplemented with a paper version for use by those less comfortable with completing forms on-line and an Urdu version. The authors presented to a meeting of BDAC committee members and site secretaries and distributed paper versions there; while a number of visits to site clubhouses were undertaken. Site secretaries were phoned asking them to encourage their tenants to complete the form. This has reduced, but not fully, eliminated a danger that the survey underrepresents plot-holders from poorer parts of the city and those sites with a higher number of ethnic minorities. The survey ran from late October 2023 to mid-January 2024 and the data was kept on a password protected system (Qualtrics). In total, we received 876 valid forms, which represents 14% of current plot-holders.

[6] https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/en/map/birmingham-allotments_972511

Alongside this, a survey of allotment secretaries was organised to gain a clearer understanding of the pressures and responsibilities that they and their committee members are experiencing in running allotment sites. Fifty seven returns were received mainly from site secretaries but also from other committee members covering fifty sites in total representing 44% of the city's sites. As well as these two surveys a range of calls and discussions were held with secretaries, committee members and tenants at a variety of sites across the city. Together this has enabled the report to draw a wide-ranging, representative picture of the strengths and weaknesses of allotment life in today's Birmingham.

Estimated Weight of Produce

On the data, the questions on estimated weight of produce harvested resulted in a variety of responses. For example, some respondents replied in lbs rather than kg; others gave a range of weight; others gave a comment or left the response blank. To standardise these responses for computer use the study adopted the following standardised procedures

- All Imperial weights were converted to kg using the standard conversion rate (1lb =0.45kg)
- Where the return gave a span of produce weights (e.g. 30-50kg) the midpoint was used
- Where the return gave a plus figures (e.g. 30+kg) a standard 5kg was added
- Around a sixth of respondents gave no estimate of the weight of their produce. They were excluded from the calculations of harvest produced in order to avoid any distortion of the averages recorded.

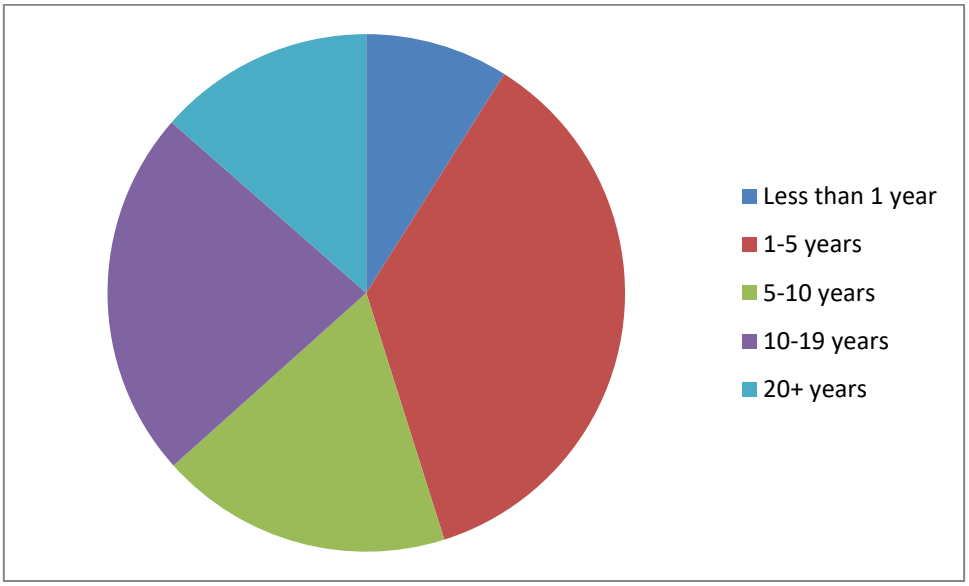
More generally, in many cases the weights recorded are broad estimates rather than precise figures. While some plot-holders meticulously weigh and record their produce, many others have given a broad approximation of the volume and weight of the crops they have harvested. Thus, care needs to be taken when assessing these figures. They are rough estimates; not definitive data. However, the survey represents the most substantial and comprehensive survey of allotment plot-holders that has been undertaken across the UK in recent years. In contrast to other studies it is not based on a self-selecting sample of the most dedicated allotment holders. As such it offers a more accurate and reliable picture of the contemporary output of allotment Britain.

3. The Changing Face of Plot-holders

The standard image of allotment holders has been of a stable, elderly male population. Yet this Birmingham survey strongly suggests that these long-established, rather traditional institutions are in a process of profound change. The most notable and marked change is with regard to women. Allotments are no longer a man's world. On our returns, women have edged marginally ahead of men with more tenancies now held by women, by 50%-49%. Secondly, there is a growing spread of ages. While 50% of plot-holders are 65 years or older, a fifth are between 30-49 years old with almost 30% aged between 50 -64. The only category with negligible involvement are the under 30s at 2%. Third, in terms of present or former work, the most common category is professional job (44%) with manual work recorded at 13%. Fourthly, the survey indicated that 15% of plot-holders come from an ethnic minority background. Both this figure and that for manual worker background should be treated with caution, in relation to the observations made in the previous section about the possible under-representation of particular parts of the city in the sample.

The length of time as a plot-holder data shows that there is also significant turnover within the allotment population. While there is a stable core of tenants with 14% having had a plot for 20 years or more, and 23% between 10-19 years there is also a steady flow of newcomers. 36% have had a plot for between 1-5 years, while 9% have acquired a plot within the past year. The site survey indicates there are a wide range of reasons why people give up their tenancies. Ill-health, new commitments and insufficient time were the three causes most commonly cited, followed by moving house and death. Regardless of the reasons for this steady turnover rate, the smooth induction of new tenancies requires considerable work for committee members, clearing plots for new tenants, issuing tenancy agreements, induction of new plot-holders, explaining the culture etc. And of course, the more the site volunteers try to maintain high levels of occupancy, the more work is required.

Figure 1. How long have you been a plot-holder?



Shift to more diverse plot sizes

There is also a clear shift away from the operation of the standard size 250 sq. metre plot. Many sites have encouraged new tenants to take up half rather than full plots or introduced more flexible plot sizes. Some sites are advising newcomers, and those with young families not to take on a standard plot but rather start on a smaller plot and work upwards later. Others are creating specific adapted spaces for people with disabilities or small 2 sq. metre raised beds designed to enable frailer, long-term plot-holders to downsize but still be able to engage with allotment life. Thus, on the latest figures there are now 1851 half-plot tenancies in the city nearly 30% of the total, while in addition there are now 278 mini-plots and 60 raised beds particularly suited to people with disabilities.[7] This is clear evidence of the significant change in plot patterns. As one branch secretary explained, “there is no longer a one size fits all policy. We’re becoming much more flexible.” Another commented, “it’s helping people with young families to come into the allotment world” reflected in the one-fifth of tenants in the 30-49 age range. This flexibility helps with older plot-holders too. Dave says, “I really

[7] Information contained in an e mail from BCC Allotments officer 18 January 2024.

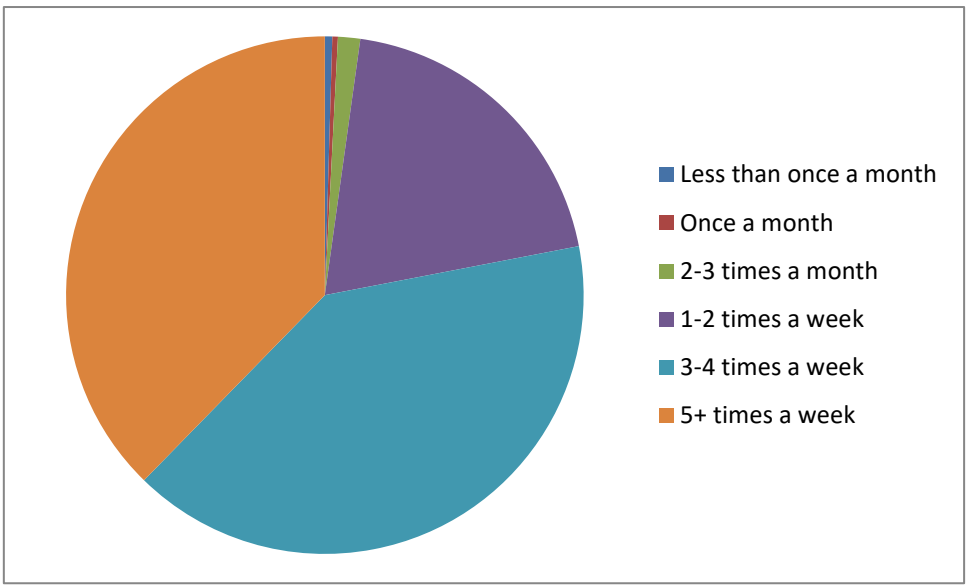
love growing vegetables and spuds. But after thirty years a whole plot is getting too much for me. My back's going and I can't take it. So I'm cutting out the spuds and last autumn I went down to a half plot. That'll be enough for me now."

The profile of allotment plot-holders is changing, confirmed by anecdotal evidence from site secretaries. But what is happening on their plots?

4. The Core Data on Food Production

The survey shows that an allotment tenancy is viewed by most plot-holders as a fairly substantial leisure activity. During the main growing months - spring, summer and early autumn - three-quarters of plot-holders go to their plot at least 3-4 times a week. (In contrast, over the winter months almost three-quarters go to their plot once or twice a month at most.)

Figure 2. How often do you go to plot in summer?

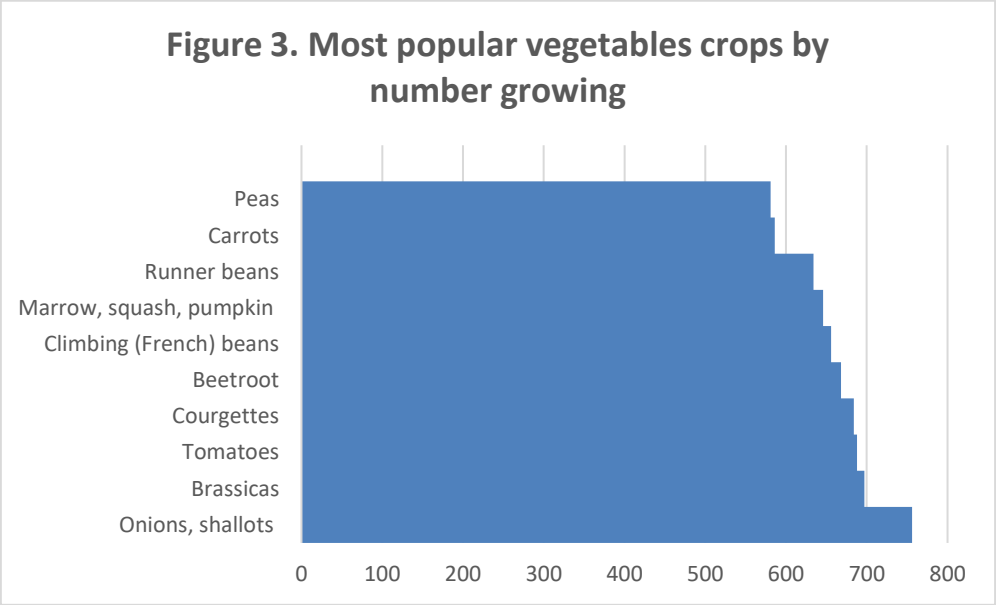


The study shows that a wide variety of produce is grown across the entire allotment estate.

88% of plot-holders grow potatoes. Of those who estimated the weight of their crop, the average grown was 30 kg. per plot. As a point of reference, in the UK annually, people typically buy 35.1 kg. of potatoes either fresh or prepared. (Defra 2017)

A very wide variety of vegetables are grown.(see Figure 3.) The most popular vegetables are onions and shallots, brassicas, tomatoes and courgettes with more than three-quarters of plot-holders cultivating these crops. One distinguishing feature of allotment life is the number of plots where at least ten different types of vegetable are grown each year indicating that many plot-holders are looking for a breadth and variety of fresh vegetables rather than prioritising mass volume. This suggests that plot-holders are curious cultivators, keen to try out and experiment with new crops.

The growing use of poly-tunnels as well as small greenhouses has made the cultivation of some crops easier e.g. cucumbers, aubergines while the growing ethnic mix of plot-holders has encouraged the proliferation of sweetcorn and the cultivation of crops such as callaloo. The increasing variety of vegetables and fruit being grown may reflect the impact of climate change as well as the increased usage of greenhouses and poly-tunnels.



Of those who estimated the weight of their crop, the average weight of vegetables harvested in 2023 was 49.2 kg.

Rather less fruit than vegetables is grown but fruit growing is very common with over three quarters of plot-holders engaged. The most popular fruits are strawberries, rhubarb and raspberries with more than two-thirds of all fruit-growing plot-holders cultivating these fruits. Of those who estimated the weight of their crop the average plot produced 20.8 kg. of fruit in 2023.

Taken as a whole and excluding those who were unable to record any figures, our sample indicates that on average 100 kg. of fresh produce was harvested on each plot in the city.

Table 1. Estimated weight of produce harvested in 2023 (kg)

	Potatoes grown	Vegetables grown	Fruit grown	Total produce
Overall weight	21,924	35,985	13,927	71,836
Average per plot	30	49	21	100

The data from this survey gives significant insight into the productive nature of allotment life in Birmingham. A significant amount of fresh produce is grown each year on allotment sites across the city. Our sample records more than 70,000 kg of produce. With our sample of those recording weights of crops harvested covering nearly one-ninth of the total allotment population this suggests that more than **630,000 kg or 630 tonnes of food** are being grown on allotments each year across the city. Given that this is fresh food, mostly produced organically and consumed within the locality where it is grown, this is a significant element of the food economy of the city**. It represents by far**

and away the most significant and consistent element of urban agriculture within the city and should be recognised as such within the city's food strategy.

The Variety of Allotment Plot-holders.

People take up allotments for a variety of reasons and with a range of intentions. As well as those determined to grow a high volume of food crops, there are those looking to grow a variety of fresh food and experiment with new crops, along with those who enjoy the relaxation and exercise that allotments bring and the friendship and company that allotments can offer. The data shows significant variations between plot-holders. Broadly, it suggests that plot-holders fall into one of three types which we can categorise as serious cultivators; keen gardeners; and leisure gardeners.

Those producing above 150 kg. of produce in a year, that is to say more than the weight of a person eating their 5 a day of fruit and vegetables, can best be described as serious cultivators. The survey shows that just over one-sixth of plot-holders (18%) meet this category. Over two fifths (44%) grow between 50 -150 kg of food a year. This category could best be termed keen gardeners. Those producing up to 50 kg. of produce a year can best be categorised as leisure gardeners and these accounted for 38% of plot-holders. The data serves as a warning to those who want to squeeze allotment plot-holders into one homogenous category.

Table 2 explores these categories in a little more detail. The proportion within each category is shown in the table. (We have excluded from our calculations the plot-holders who gave no figures for the weight of their produce.)

Table 2. Plot-holder by Type by %

	All	Male	Female	65+	20+ years	BAME
Leisure gardener.						
Less than 50kg.	38.4	34.6	42.7	30.0	24.8	15.7
Keen gardener						
50-150 kg.	43.7	45.9	41.2	56.5	47.5	58.8
Serious cultivator						
Over 150kg.	17.8	19.6	16.1	14.5	27.7	25.5

The table shows:

- a slightly higher percentage of male respondents were categorised as 'serious cultivators' than the percent of female respondents, with women slightly more prevalent amongst leisure gardeners;
- that the over 65s are more likely to be keen gardeners, which may be related to having more time to devote to their plots;
- that three-quarters of those with more than twenty years as a plot-holder fall into the keen gardener or serious cultivator category;

- that black and Asian plot-holders are much less likely to be leisure gardeners with over four-fifths falling into the keen or serious cultivator categories.

The overall food production data serves as a good mirror on the diverse reality of allotment life. People choose to have an allotment tenancy for a variety of reasons and the gender, demographic and ethnic differences reflected in Table 2 serve to underline this.

Comparison with other Studies

Because allotments are cultivated by private individuals, statistics on allotment food production and value are scarce. A literature review by Eftec[8] concluded that the most reliable food production estimate per standard 250 m2 allotment plot is 487 kg per year. This figure based on a Royal Horticultural Society study in 1975 is viewed as "the only known statistical record of vegetable crop produce harvested from allotment plots."[9] A Birmingham City Council report on parks and green spaces in 2019 took this data as its baseline.

More recently, researchers have sought to get more specific data by utilising 'citizen science' methods, asking a limited number of allotment holders to keep detailed records of their production. A Leicester study by Edmondson et al[10] used this method. It recruited 64 allotment tenants from 16 sites across England via allotment and horticultural outreach events. They used a reporting form in which the area of land used to grow a specific crop and the weight of that crop when harvested were reported. The researchers then assessed total allotment land area in Leicester, and on this basis calculated that total fruit and vegetable production on allotment plots in Leicester was approximately 1.6 kg produce per sq. metre amounting to 400 kg of produce on a standard plot. The report claimed that yields of fruit and vegetable crops achieved by allotment gardeners in the UK were often as good or exceeded those of commercial horticulture. (Paragraph 4.1.)

In Brighton a specific study on allotments commissioned and funded in 2021 by the Brighton and Hove Allotment Federation (BHAF) and delivered by researchers from the University of Sussex, produced similar results. Based on the returns of thirty four citizen scientists the report claimed that City allotments could be as productive as conventional farms, a finding similar to the Leicester study.

A recent paper by the Birmingham City of Nature programme makes similar claims. Assuming that the average allotment holder produces 1.8kg of produce per sq. metre, the authors state that allotments have the potential to provide the 5 per day requirement for 63,000 people or 5.5% of the total Birmingham population.

These are bold claims. This report casts severe doubt on their accuracy. There are serious flaws in the approach. Using aggregate data and GIS calculations gives an appearance of scientific rigour but these techniques are used to aggregate up the selective returns of a few dedicated allotment users.

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[8] Eftec, 2017. A Study to Scope and Develop Urban Natural Capital Accounts for the UK. Economics for the Environment Consultancy Ltd, London

[9] Cook, R., 2006. A Study of Allotments and Small Land Plots: Benchmarking for Vegetable Food Crop Production (PhD Thesis). University of Glamorgan. Pontypridd p.93.

[10] Jill L. Edmondson, Dylan Z. Childs, Miriam C. Dobson, Kevin J. Gaston, Philip H. Warren, Jonathan R. Leake Feeding a city – Leicester as a case study of the importance of allotments for horticultural production in the UK Science of The Total Environment, Volume 705, 25 February 2020.

The completely untested assumption in these studies is that these self-selected respondents are representative of allotment users in general. Neither the Leicester nor Brighton studies produce any evidence that their small samples reflect the allotment population as a whole. They make no mention of the danger that a small self-selected number of respondents, being asked to undertake detailed returns over a lengthy period are likely to be the most committed, enthusiastic plot-holders, in no way representative of an allotment site as a whole. Basing their estimates on these returns, these studies will have seriously inflated the actual amounts of food produced on the average allotment plot.

Two examples from our data highlight this danger. The RHS state that the average allotment produces 487kg of produce a year. The Leicester study assumes 400 kg on a standard plot. Of the respondents to our survey just eleven reported that they produced at least 487 kg of produce a year. In other words a mere 1.5% of plot-holders met the stated RHS average for food production. 2%, a mere fifteen met the Leicester standard.

Secondly, examine the claim that allotments could feed 5% or more of the city's population by meeting the 5 a day standard. Leave aside the question that most plots do not produce food in a steady flow throughout the year and that many products are not suitable for freezing or easy storage. The 5 a day standard requires 146 kg. of food to be produced each year. (5 products at 80 grams a day =400 grams a day x 365 days = 146 kg a year.) In our study we categorised serious cultivators as those producing 150 kg. or more of their own fruit and vegetables. In total, we found that just 18% of plot- holders grew this amount of food.

Thus, the data shows that it is possible to reach the targets set out in these studies but crucially that this is nowhere near the norm for the everyday plot-holder. Bland assumptions that the most productive allotment growers are the norm is flawed research. It leads to inaccurate claims and utopian policy conclusions such as that "city allotments could be as productive as conventional farms."[11] More recently, an article in 'Land' by Caputo, Schoen and Blythe[12] has cautioned against such overoptimistic approaches. It notes the wide variety of performance in different venues and states that "the evaluation of citywide productivity, often based on projections of small data samples may not be reliable."

There is an unsubstantiated assumption in these studies that allotment plot-holders are all similarly productive. Our survey was open to all plot-holders and shows the significant variation between them. It was not reliant on gathering information from just the keenest growers and taking that as the standard benchmark. We believe this approach has enabled us to achieve a more accurate and balanced assessment of allotment production. Our figures make the case for allotments as an important means of producing locally sourced food. There is no need to exaggerate allotment site productivity to underline this point. We are in discussion with the National Allotment Society to use this survey method at other allotments across the country in order to build up a more extensive database.

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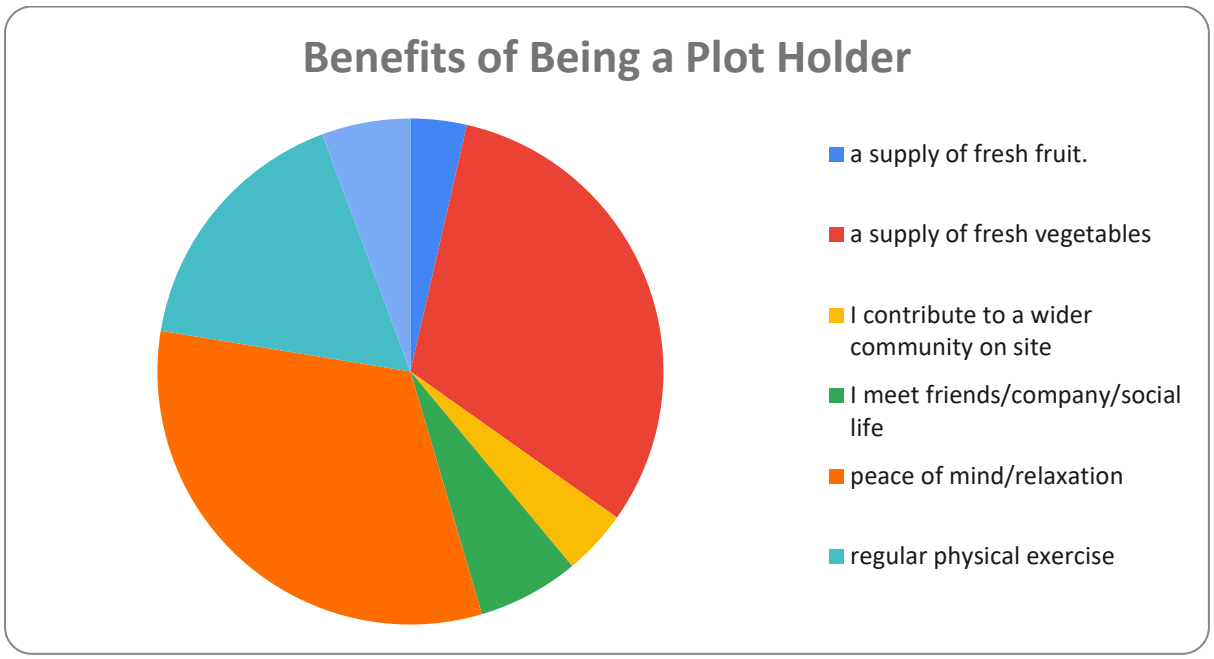
[11] https://www.bhaf.org.uk/content/advice/starting/study-in-brighton-and-hove-shows-value-of-urban-food-production Science of the Total Environment 25 February 2020

[12] Silvio Caputo, Victoria Schoen and Chris Blythe. Productivity and Efficiency of Community Gardens: Case Studies from the UK Land. 12 January 2023. https://www.mdpi.com/2073-445X/12/1/238

5. Benefits of Allotment Life

The Milan declaration outlines the diverse contribution that allotments make to urban life. One of its key elements is to stress the contribution that allotments can make to the well-being of residents. Our survey questions on the benefits of allotments very much reflected that view. The survey outlined six potential benefits. Scores of over 90% were recorded for those stating as a benefit regular physical exercise, peace of mind and relaxation as well as a supply of fresh vegetables. In the survey's most significant finding, when asked to identify the most important benefit of being an allotment tenant, peace of mind and relaxation emerged at the top of the poll. It was the main priority for 32% followed by 31% for supply of fresh vegetables and 17% for regular physical exercise.

Figure 4. Which of these benefits is most important to you?



Zabora's story is illustrative. A 40 year old Asian housewife, she got a leaflet through her door telling her about a gardening club that was starting at a nearby allotment site in East Birmingham. She decided to go along. With another Asian woman she began on a small plot. She really liked it and has now moved to share a full plot. When we met on a cold winter morning she showed me how she had laid out the area and the garlic crop that was coming through, along with some herbs. "I love it down here. I grow a variety of crops. I used to suffer from anxiety. The GP gave me pills. But I just find it so relaxing down here, away from it all that I don't take them now."

This has genuinely significant implications for the NHS and social care services in the city. There has been sporadic interest in 'social prescribing.' Three decades ago, a pilot scheme of leisure prescriptions was trialled in the city, where GPs gave a voucher for swimming lessons, instead of medical pills for overweight patients. There is no doubt that the same thinking could be applied to allotment tenancies and gardening more generally. They offer an accessible source of regular exercise and/or mental relaxation to patients in need of physical activity or respite from the strains of

urban life.[13] A co-ordinated drive to encourage patients to take up allotment tenancies would be beneficial to all concerned and requires administration co-ordination rather than any new money.[14]

We live in an ageing society which places an increased emphasis on well-being and the need for physical exercise and mental relaxation. The Labour Party emphasises the need to shift the policy balance within the NHS away from hospitals and acute care to primary and community care. Allotments could and perhaps should be part of this narrative.

At the same time the enormous benefits that allotment plot-holders gain in terms of regular exercise and mental serenity from working their allotments shows why councils should give a higher profile to allotments in their environmental and 'green spaces' policies. They should also feature prominently in any national review of the planning system.

6. Allotments: The Community Dimension

Many allotment tenants just want to tend their plot and grow their crops. Others enjoy the company of fellow plot-holders and the haven of peace and quiet that the allotment provides. Yet allotments can't run on auto-pilot. They are a public asset and need regular care and repair. Whatever increasingly limited support they get from the local authority, their smooth operation and management increasingly depends on the energy and enthusiasm of the volunteers who run the 113 sites.

6.1. The basic organisation

The collection of rents is managed by the Allotment Associations on behalf of Birmingham City Council. Since 2015, the management of Birmingham allotments has operated on a 'full cost recovery' basis meaning that the income from rents covers all the costs of allotments. To achieve this, management duties were devolved to the volunteer allotment associations alongside a major reduction in BCC staff to support the management function – see below. Allotment associations signed a management agreement with the council that enables them to manage lettings, ensure that plot holders follow the rules, undertake repairs and maintenance, take responsibility for health and safety, monitor site horticultural maintenance and pay water costs. To do this, each site is given a limited, devolved budget.

In the recent review of that management agreement by a BDAC working group it became increasingly clear that many site committees were unaware of their responsibilities under its terms and in many cases unaware that their site had consented to the agreement. It is hoped that this can be addressed in the establishment of a replacement agreement, but the process of agreeing the document has already taken two years. Crucially, the limited resource, 0.6 of a council allotments officer on one side, limited numbers of volunteers on the other, inevitably impacts on the speed of the decision-making process. The Birmingham and District Allotments Confederation also signed an agreement with the council empowering them to support the associations in their management duties and act as mediators in disputes. Again however, many site committees are unaware of this

[13] In terms of making the case for extending provision of allotments, the absence of sites in Ladywood should be addressed.

[14] If allotments became a regular social prescribing route for GPs in the city there is little doubt that this would increase demand for plots in a system operating at about 85% capacity. There is a whole debate to be had about increasing allotment capacity in the long term.

and BDAC, itself a volunteer organisation, struggles to discharge its responsibilities fully under the Agreement. All Birmingham plot holders are BDAC members.

6.2. Impact of the cuts

The vast majority of allotments[15] in Birmingham are managed and owned by Birmingham City Council (BCC). Since 2010 BCC, like all other local authorities have had to deal with the austerity policies of national government and a consequent huge loss of revenue, in terms both of reduced national government support and severe constraints on its own capacity to raise any counterbalancing income from local revenue sources such as council tax / business rates. This has had a knock-on effect on allotment support as in every other service area. There is now only 0.6 of an officer within the local authority responsible for managing the 7,000 plus plots compared with five officers with area responsibilities up to 2015.

Jenny was the secretary of a large site in South-West Birmingham. She recalls how helpful the officers were resolving the type of issues that invariably arise in the management of a site. "They helped me with maintenance issues, getting ditches cleared and fallen trees cut, advising on funds and the day-day disputes that can arise on a site. Being a secretary is enjoyable but tiring; having some officers on hand to help made things a lot easier." All that type of support has now gone. This inevitably impacts on the capacity of the local authority to exercise its regulatory and enforcement role or to offer anything proactive in terms of actual coordination, while placing even more responsibility on the shoulders of allotment site committee members. Birmingham may well be typical in running its allotments on a "full cost recovery" basis, which essentially means limiting overhead costs to what can be recovered from rents.

This means that on-going basic activity classified as revenue spending like grass-cutting, clearing ditches and hedges is scheduled to occur on most sites funded through BCC services but sites complain that this is either non-existent or sporadic. Whether or not this is true, reliable monitoring of this area of activity is unquestionably one casualty of the shortage of resource on both sides. Costly tasks categorised as capital expenditure such as maintaining security fences and mending potholes are not covered by this contract in any event. There is no capital budget remaining for the allotment estate other than the Flo Pickering Fund, which uses a proportion of any capital receipts from the sale of allotment land. Any new capital spend can only be found through successful fund-raising by individual sites.

6.3. The Neglected Asset

Thousands of Birmingham citizens find peace and quiet on their allotment plot. They grow lots of fresh fruit and veg; they chat with their mates and make new friends; enjoy the fresh air and regular

[15] The Guinea Gardens predate the large scale creation of municipal allotments in the early 20th Century

exercise; and harvest over 630 tonnes of produce a year. Nestled in the nooks and crannies of Birmingham, often in corners of land obscured from public view, these 113 sites are hidden assets.[16]

Yet, the harsh truth is that allotments have become a neglected part of the City Council's estate. They are hidden from view and largely forgotten. They have had few advocates, either amongst councillors or officials nor within the voluntary and environmental organisations. No effort is made to publicise and promote allotments by the Council, other than a presence on the BCC web-site. It was unsurprising that in the secretaries' survey thirty-one of the returns described the support received from the City Council as only 'slightly effective' or 'not effective at all.'

The contrast with the attitude towards allotment in authorities elsewhere – in Walsall for example[17] - is stark. This means that despite the best efforts of many site secretaries and committee members, parts of the allotment estate have fallen into disrepair. While this report got a strong positive response from plot-holders across the city, it also showed that there are a substantial number of sites with little contact with BDAC and even less engagement with its work. Despite extensive promotion, the study got no returns from twenty-four sites and a single return from a further fifteen, while the latest council data reveals that six sites have less than 50% occupancy.

A further consequence of this neglect is the relative invisibility of allotments in the strategies being pursued by the City Council. The City of Nature Plan[18] doesn't even mention allotments, despite a series of strategic goals in terms of maintaining green space, citizens taking part in health and wellbeing activities at least once a week in green space and 50% of social prescriptions using green spaces to which allotments could make a significant contribution. Similarly the food system policy document[19] has little reference to allotments and has no strategy to optimise the potential of allotments in producing food locally and targeting locally left behind communities.

6.4. The Secretaries' Survey.

The survey of secretaries and committee members received responses from fifty different sites across the city. Generally, the responses came from the sites where there had been a good response to the plot-holder survey but there were a considerable number also from smaller sites and where the response had been limited. With a 45% return the study provides a good insight into the key issues facing allotment associations in the city.

Among the key findings were the following:

- There is a mix of experience among site secretaries and committee members overall with twelve having been in the job for 10+years while fifteen had been in post for two years or less.
- There was a very even distribution of the reasons given for why people give up tenancies.

[16] 'The courgettes were so good last year, I got a tattoo of one': life on a Birmingham allotment | Allotments | The Guardian 14 April 2024.
[17] https://www.expressandstar.com/news/local-hubs/walsall/2020/12/11/250000-investment-into-walsall-allotments/
[18] Our Future Nature City Plan. Birmingham City of Nature Plan February 2022
[19] Birmingham Food System Strategy. A bolder, healthier and more sustainable Birmingham August 2023.

- 41 of returns recorded a 90+% occupancy on their site - 6% higher than the overall BCC figure- which indicates that this could be reasonably set as an overall city-wide target.
- 80% of the sites responding to the survey keep waiting lists and altogether within our sample 425 people are currently on the waiting list. Eight sites said that their average wait is more than two years while on another eleven sites the waiting time varies from one-two years.
- Amongst the problem issues facing allotment committees, the most common cited was over-grown plots. One of the observations made was that the City Council needs to be quicker to issue closure notices where tenants have not paid their rent, so that sites can be quickly re-let and thereby prevent the danger of overgrown plots, which are then much harder to let.
- Over 60% have some club premises, used for a variety of social purposes largely on a small scale. Just under a third have links to schools, a little more to local community organisations. 40% have some non-standard tenants on their site e.g. special schools. Others run events for their plot-holders and the wider community e.g. produce shows, barbeques etc. and initiatives to attract new members like gardening clubs or raised beds for people with disabilities.
- These activities are often connected to successful fund-raising. Applications to national lottery and heritage lottery funds were common along with some local charitable funds. Understandably, on many sites overstretched volunteers often focus on the basic tasks of responding to the immediate needs of plot-holders but if the allotment community wants to maximise its potential, it needs to adopt a consistently outward-looking profile.

There seems to be significant scope for expansion here. In our survey, twenty-six sites stated they undertake no external fund-raising. Among non-responding sites, the proportion is likely to be even higher. Across the city, it is clear that more external resources could be raised for many other sites. There are technical skills associated with successful fund-raising; the writing of applications is an art in itself. However, there are experienced fund-raisers within the allotment community, whose knowledge should need to be tapped into. There are sites that have secured as much as £30,000 for various improvements, principally from the Lottery Fund. Organisations such as Birmingham Open Spaces Forum can also provide know-how, while its own success in funding seven staff shows how both individual sites and BDAC itself could benefit from a more organised and focused approach.

Basically, the smooth operation and management of allotments depends on the energy and enthusiasm of the volunteers who run the sites. The strain is beginning to tell. This was evident in the extensive number of comments in the secretaries' survey about the need for more support from other plot-holders with a number of responses striking a plaintive note. The reality is that David Cameron's vision of 'the big society' can't work without solid institutional support. This can take a variety of organisational forms. The Birmingham Confederation is now discussing various options with the council but the basic fact is that whoever takes the lead, there needs to be active stewardship of the allotment estate.

The more focused use of allotment rental income could offer that stewardship. But it needs to be combined with a community engagement strategy by allotments themselves. This relates to a broader political question: are allotments primarily inward-looking or do they see themselves as community assets open to their neighbourhood and wanting to attract onto their patch local

families, schools and youngsters interested in nature and environmental issues? The latter approach requires a shift in allotment culture. The more active sites are showing the way. Fundraising has enabled some to maintain and modernise their sites. Funds have been secured for new raised beds and mini-plots; to publicise and set up gardening clubs encouraging local people to join; to upgrade premises; and construct poly-tunnels and community sheds. The outward-looking profile not only helps sites to attract funds but also to make sites more of a community hub. The secretaries' survey showed a range of events and engagements which many allotment sites undertake. With restrictions on council budgets likely to stay for the foreseeable future, an outward-looking drive to attract funds from other sources and present allotments as an integral element of their local community is an integral element of the way forward. BDAC Secretary Hester Blewitt set out the cultural shift required at the Confederation's AGM.

"Access to our sites should be for the local community. Applications for additional funds must include a community dimension so that families and children will use the sites."

7. Recommendations. A Practical 5 Point Programme

Everybody knows that the City Council has been bankrupted and faces very tough times. **Yet this should not be used as an excuse for resignation and inertia.** The allotment estate and its 113 sites are a hidden gem providing enormous opportunities for thousands of households across the city to grow their own food, to relax and to undertake regular exercise. They are an economic, social, cultural and public health asset. Much more can be made of them in ways that involve little financial cost but requires some imaginative organisation and innovation. Based on the findings of this report here are five initial suggestions for further consideration by the key stakeholders, principally Birmingham City Council. BDAC and the sites themselves.

1. **Give allotments some basic publicity**

Use the press, radio and social media to advertise the availability of allotments. Currently, their existence is largely invisible to the general public. Make simple placards to put outside the sites themselves. Make contact details of site secretaries easily available. The city's allotments are not a closed world; they need to be easily accessible to all who could be interested in them. BDAC has already improved online visibility, but more could be done through other stakeholders, including the sites themselves.

2. **Increase the occupancy rate**.

Despite the absence of publicity the survey results confirm that the demand for allotment tenancies is already high. The current occupancy rate of 85% according to BCC's latest figures suggests that there are over 1,100 vacant plots available within the city. But demand and supply are not evenly matched. Some of the better organised sites have lengthy waiting lists and long waiting times. BDAC has recently introduced an on-site web form to speed up the access to securing an allotment plot. It asks people to follow five simple steps.

- Firstly, click on a Birmingham Allotments map.
- Secondly, find an allotment near you using the interactive map and then click on that site.

- Thirdly, click on the site details page.
- Then click on 'contact the site.'
- Finally fill in the enquiry form and submit.

If you have not received a reply in 10 days it tells the enquirer to contact the BDAC webmaster, who will chase up the enquiry for you. This 5 click method is beginning to speed up the recruitment process. An obvious step would be to replicate it on the City Council website – where the current waiting time is advertised as 8 weeks! Alongside this new streamlined system to accelerate recruitment, BDAC could explore matching waiting list vacancies to site vacancies and thereby encourage a system of cooperation across sites. This would help weaker sites with fewer human resources to fill their vacancies.

A concerted drive to lift occupancy rates to 90% would increase the number of plot-holders by over 400. It would reduce waiting lists, help people get a healthier life-style and bring around £40,000 p.a of useful extra income into the system. The demand is there. It should be a no-brainer for BCC and all the agencies.

3. Explore Health and social prescribing

Maximising the use of allotments should be a priority for the city's public health and GP services. This study shows the real benefits that allotment plot-holders gain in terms of regular exercise and mental serenity from working their allotments. Progressive thinking on health now emphasises the importance of prevention rather than pills. The NHS has developed its policy thinking on green social prescribing with detailed programmes and a policy toolkit.[20] The prescribing of allotment tenancies should be part of the preventive repertoire open to doctors and health practitioners.

A GP, Professor Sam Evrington discussing the nation's health crisis on the BBC Today programme (8th March 2024) mentioned the importance of regular exercise and gardening. Our study found that people living in flats and maisonettes are significantly under-represented in the city's allotment population. This makes it all the more important that when GPs are thinking of 'social prescribing' an allotment option is easily accessible for them. That's why this report suggests that discussions should start quickly with the relevant primary care commissioning services so that the 5 click method can be made available through the city's NHS and GP services.

4. Move Allotments up the BCC Policy Priority Ladder .

The positive role of allotments needs to be recognised and clearly stated in BCC policy documents.[21] As in Bristol, **allotments should be a prime target and early thrust of BCC's Food Strategy**. Two practical immediate steps would be to apportion part of its staffing and public health resources to a promotional drive to boost occupancy and to maximise the engagement of sites with local food banks and other providers of food at cost to local communities. Increasing the number of plot-holders and the quantity of food distributed to disadvantaged individuals and communities, for example by working with groups like Food Cycle would be two simple performance indicators that the strategy can quickly adopt.

[20] https://socialprescribingacademy.org.uk/what-is-social-prescribing/natural-environment-and-social-prescribing/green-toolkit/

[21] The omission of any mention in the Our Future Nature City Plan should be rectified.

In the longer term, policy-makers and planners will need to incorporate shared allotment plots into new housing developments, especially in areas of dense apartment building. Further urban population expansion will exert increasing development pressure on allotment land. Policy-makers should both protect allotments within cities, and ensure that a plentiful supply of urban agricultural land and green spaces are embedded within future developments to improve local well-being.

5. **Improve BDAC's Fund-raising and other Capabilities**.

BDAC is making steady progress in streamlining its own procedures and drawing more active volunteers into its work. This study is not focussed on its current or potential future role or the future options for the management and governance of Birmingham's allotment estate. However, it does recognise how the impact of austerity places increasing responsibilities on the Confederation and site volunteers across the city. This places a growing weight on the shoulders of site committee members.

The survey shows that more than half of sites do not undertake fund-raising. Yet it is enormously beneficial for those that have been able to raise funds to modernise their site. It is clear that more resources could be raised for other sites too. However, there are technical skills associated with successful fund-raising; the writing of applications is an art in itself. There are experienced fund-raisers within the allotment community. They should be approached and asked to run the occasional BDAC training session for allotment committee members across the city.

BDAC is already taking steps to modernise its IT systems, linking all secretaries together and introducing the new streamlined system to accelerate recruitment of new plot-holders. A complementary step would be to match waiting list vacancies to site vacancies and encourage a system of cooperation across sites. This would help to tackle the issue of weaker sites with fewer human resources and much lower occupancies.

The large turn-out of over 160 people for BDAC's Annual General Meeting in March 2024, the engaged discussion on its future plans and the infusion of new blood onto the Executive suggests that the allotment community recognises that this is a pivotal moment. This report highlights the considerable contribution they make to the supply of fresh food in the city and the physical and mental well-being of allotment plot-holders, all underpinned by the voluntary efforts of allotment committee members across the city's 113 sites. There is huge potential to expand the contribution of allotments to the city's well-being in the years ahead. The practical proposals in this report suggest some of the ways this can be done. There are no excuses for inertia.

8. What Next? - Areas to Explore Further

The overall return on the survey was impressive, by far the largest direct, grass-roots analysis of the tenant population that has been undertaken in the recent past. Yet, there are still issues that remain to be addressed – again for further consideration by BDAC and the sites themselves.

The biggest question thrown up by the survey is whether it sufficiently reflects the geographical, class and ethnic reality of the city's allotment population as a whole. A total of 24 sites failed to register any returns at all. Of these 8 were in the Yardley constituency; 4 in Perry Barr; 4 in Hodge

Hill; 3 in Erdington; 2 in Sutton and 1 each in Northfield and Hall Green. In our view there is likely to be a correlation between the rate of return and the extent to which an individual site has an active executive. Completion or even knowledge of the survey depends on the extent to which a site has contact with BDAC. The absence of returns suggests that the least active sites are in a geographical arc across the north-west through to the east of the city covering largely working class and inner-city neighbourhoods.

The responses to the question on what work you do or did showed just a 13% response for manual work which suggests that this lower than expected figure may be due to an underrepresentation from within the sample of the city's working class areas.

Similarly, it is unclear whether the survey accurately captures the ethnic minority profile of the allotment world with just 15% of returns from black, Asian and mixed race communities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the figure could be much higher. In separate conversations with more than a dozen plot-holders and committee members, we were told of East Europeans, Bosnians, Greeks, Iraqi refugees, Afghanis, Kurds, Hong Kongese and Ukrainians on different sites, which is barely reflected in the data. To address this issue, paper questionnaires were printed; a number of secretaries handed these out to plot-holders; some face-face interviews on allotment premises were undertaken; and in all over 130 questionnaires were returned to the authors and the data inputted manually. Despite these efforts, the final data suggests that the survey did not reach all parts of the allotment population. More detailed face- to-face survey of selected sites during the spring and summer months would be needed to achieve a more detailed response.

As with any study, lessons have been learnt through the undertaking itself. The first and perhaps most important lesson is that much more useful information could be gained by repeating the exercise – perhaps on a regular basis. More specifically, in any repeat of this process, in Birmingham or elsewhere, we would recommend the following:

- Issue the survey earlier in the food production year and pre-notify plot-holders. The survey was made available from late October. Plot-holders may be more likely to answer the food production question on or around the end of the growing season in late September.
- Consider more pre-survey preparation. Make online completion of the plot-holder survey the default option but provide more advance notice and support during the spring and summer months. This should help address the under-representation issue identified above. Remove text options for questions with a numerical answer.
- Ask specific questions about use of poly-tunnels and greenhouses. The range of vegetables produced revealed a number of tender crops, which are rarely grown outdoors. It would be useful to get a sense of how widespread is the practice of indoor cultivation.
- Ask specific questions about change in tenancy arrangements e.g. increased use of half-plots.

It may also be worth considering the contribution which allotment sites make as green spaces to the ecology of a heavily built up city. This was in the original brief for this study but was dropped because a different methodology would be required to record the plant and animal life supported by allotment sites. There was only limited resource available for completing the study so it was decided to focus specifically on benefits to plot-holders.

9. Conclusions

This study has shown the substantial contribution that allotments make to the city. Our report suggests that there is huge potential to expand the contribution of allotments to the city's well-being in the years ahead. In particular, it highlights four issues which may well have a more general application to the allotment movement across the UK.

- Firstly, allotments are becoming a more accurate reflection of the wider community with a much greater engagement of women, non-pensioner age groups and ethnic minorities.
- Secondly, we have shown that allotment plot-holders produce a significant volume of fresh potatoes, vegetables and fruit each year. Our survey suggests that on average at least 100 kg of fresh food is harvested from plots across the allotment estate. However, our findings are lower than the claims of some other studies for the reasons explained in Section 4.
- Thirdly, our study highlights the diverse benefits which plot-holders gain from the cultivation of their allotment and in particular the physical and mental health benefits. Public health officials and GPs should recognise this benefit and embed allotment tenancies in their social prescribing tool-kit.
- Fourthly, local authority cutbacks create real pressures on the allotment community. With restrictions on council budgets likely to stay for the foreseeable future, an outward-looking drive to attract funds from other sources and present allotments as an integral element of their local community looks to be the most promising way forward.

In terms of policy two main points are evident. Firstly, most plots produce a significant amount of fresh produce and with the climate crisis, increasing environmental awareness and rising food costs, the coming years may see a higher crop yields amongst tenants. The potential of allotments should be an important focus of the city's Food Strategy. Secondly, the recognition of these wider benefits of allotment engagement for physical and mental well-being demands a shift in policy thinking among GPs, public health and planning professionals as well as the city council.

The report has outlined **a set of practical actions designed to maximise allotment usage. (Section7.) We urge all relevant agencies across the city to support these proposals.**

Allotments are essentially a low-cost public investment, which integrate a whole range of interventions, which policy-makers tend to look at separately. It may be a handicap in public policy terms that having an allotment has so many, varied benefits under headings like social prescribing, local food sourcing, empowering local communities and protecting green spaces. Policy strategists follow politicians in thinking in compartments but the need for a comprehensive overview of the allotment role has never been clearer. At a moment of extreme financial stringency, this broad perspective is more important than ever.

Allotments offer simple yet vital human pleasures – the joy of growing vegetables from seed and watching them flourish; an oasis from the stresses of daily life; the benefits of regular exercise; the camaraderie of sharing tips, tools, food, conversations with other plot-holders of all ages, backgrounds and different walks of life. Birmingham's allotments deserve a higher profile and more attention from all decision-makers across the city.