



Allotments Policy

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Definition of allotments gardening

An allotment garden, more commonly referred to simply as an allotment, is a plot of land made available for individual, non-commercial growing of food plants. Typically, the allotment garden is rented annually from a provider.

Brief history of British allotments

Allotments have been in existence and use for hundreds of years, with reliable evidence stretching back to Anglo-Saxon times. However, the system we recognize today has its roots in the nineteenth century, when land was given over to the labouring poor for the provision of food growing. This provision was sorely needed given the movement of people from the country to the town, propelled by the Industrial Revolution. The absence of any concerted welfare systems meant that malnutrition was widespread throughout the population.

In 1908 the Small Holdings and Allotments Act came into force, placing a duty on local authorities to provide a sufficient number of allotments, depending on local demand. However, it wasn't until the end of the First World War that land was made available to all, primarily to assist returning servicemen (Land Settlement Facilities Act, 1919) as well as the labouring poor.

The rights of allotment holders in England and Wales were strengthened through the 1922 Allotments Act but the most significant change was brought about by the 1925 Allotments Act. This established statutory allotments which local authorities could not dispose of without the consent of a central government minister.

There is little reliable documentary evidence about the history of allotment provision in the town of Wokingham. Anecdotally the sites at Gipsy Lane, Latimer Road and Ormonde Road have been in constant use since the early nineteen-thirties.

Main central government legislation for allotments

The Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908 – this repealed and consolidated the previous law and deals almost entirely with the provision of allotments and the compensation payable to tenants on the termination of their tenancies.

The Land Settlement (Facilities) Act 1919 – this abolished the reference to 'labouring population' and made metropolitan borough councils allotment authorities for the first time.

The Allotments Act 1922 – this established a degree of security of tenure for the tenants and improved their rights to compensation on termination for improvements made to the land. It also limited the size of an allotment to one quarter of an acre and required that allotment gardens should be used mostly for growing fruits and vegetables.

The Allotments Act 1925 – this required town planning authorities to give special consideration to the provision of allotments when preparing district town planning schemes. It established

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statutory allotments which a local authority could not sell or convert to other purposes without the consent of a central government minister.

The Agricultural Land (Utilisation) Act 1931 – this was a measure to relieve unemployment at the time, by promoting the use of allotments and smallholdings.

The Allotments Act 1950 – this was passed following the report of the Allotments Advisory Committee. However, not all the committee's recommendations were included. It did further improve the security of tenure of allotment tenants and amended the laws governing these tenancies. It also restricted the obligations of local authorities regarding allotment provision and increased the amount of money which local authorities could expend on allotments from general rates.

Core purposes of the allotments strategy

1. To ensure that all allotment plots which are rented are in continual productive use whilst acknowledging the variable gardening abilities of the tenants.
2. To establish criteria for the set-up and subsequent letting of any new allotment sites within the town boundary. The set-up will normally be undertaken by housing developers with the support of Wokingham Borough Council. The provisions will be established within the planning application.

The guiding principle of this strategy is to promote the many physical, social, health and well-being benefits of allotment gardening.

Benefits of allotment gardening

Apart from the obvious benefit of physical activity the allotments form part of the overall urban space resource within the town. The following benefits, whilst not an exhaustive list, illustrate the value of allotments and allotment gardening:

- creates and maintains green 'lungs' in the urban landscape
- provides opportunities for town dwellers to learn about and experience gardening and horticulture
- provides an opportunity for people to share their gardening knowledge and to pass on gardening skills
- provides opportunities for people to undertake activities which are beneficial to their physical and mental well-being
- provides opportunities for social inclusion with an element of ethnic and socio-economic diversity

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- decreases the energy required in the production and transportation of food, particularly if tenants walk to and from the sites
- produces food for personal consumption
- contributes towards the diversity of flora and fauna

Wokingham Town Council: current provision of allotments

There are four statutory sites within the town boundary:

Site	Size in hectares	Number of plots
Gipsy Lane	1.0	86
Latimer Road	0.7	62
Ormonde Road	1.9	197
St. Paul's Gate	0.2	23
Binfield Road	0.4	42
Mulberry Grove	0.34	30

The area of the Town Council's individual allotment plots is measured in square poles. One square pole roughly equates to 5 square metres. The standard sized plot since 2009 is 2.5 square poles. In the main plots range from 1.5 to 5 square poles. By exception there are a small number of larger plots.

Except for St. Paul's Gate the Town Council owns the freehold of the sites. St. Paul's Gate is leased from the trustees of Wokingham Free Church Burial Ground, Reading Road. In December 2021, the Town Council is in discussion with the Borough Council about the transfer of ownership of the Binfield Road site.

Administering and managing the allotments

The Town Council has for many years employed an amenities officer, and subsequently an allotments officer, whose duties include administering the letting of the plots along with monitoring their usage by tenants.

Since 2007 there has been a waiting list for Town Council allotment plots. In December 2021 this had 396 names on it. Tenancies are offered to the first name on the list on when a plot becomes available.

New allotment tenancies are managed through a signed allotment agreement, the central clause of which is that 75% of the plot must be regularly cultivated from March to November each year. The allotments officer inspects plots every three weeks or so and where appropriate contacts tenants about non-cultivation. Tenants are allowed ample time to improve their plots.

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However, if tenants do not address issues the final sanction is for WTC to take back the plot via a 'notice to quit' letter.

Plot tenancies are controlled through a computer software system leased from Rialtas Business Solutions. Tenancies are managed by this system; it also generates the rent due notification letters, the responsibility for which lies with the responsible financial officer and the financial assistant.

The rental income produced by the allotment tenancies partly offsets the running costs of the sites: staff salaries and their ancillary costs, site maintenance, grass cutting contract, water et al. The balance is paid for from the Town Council's precept income.

The Town Council's policy when dealing with incursions by large, wild mammals fully applies to its allotment sites.

Alternative mechanisms for managing allotment sites are self-management by associations of tenants or incorporation into a grounds maintenance contract.

Promoting allotment gardening

It is the Town Council's policy to promote allotment gardening by highlighting its many benefits.

Details of the allotment sites are held on a discrete area of the Town Council's website. This includes an enquiry form to enable prospective tenants to register their interest in renting a plot.

The availability of plots is promoted by means of a specially produced cross-street advertising banner, the Town Council's social media engagement, articles in local newspapers, posters on the noticeboards at each allotment site, email, the annual allotments newsletter, and the annual Town Council newsletter.

New tenants are provided with a welcome pack which has many hints and tips for those who are not experienced gardeners.

Annually the Town Council organizes a competition for the best plots per site. Judging is undertaken by experienced allotment gardeners with engraved trophies and gardening vouchers as prizes.

Encouraging sustainable allotment gardening

It is the Town Council's policy to promote and encourage sustainable allotment gardening.

All tenants with a shed on their plot are regularly requested to install gutters, downpipes and butts to capture rainwater to use. Since March 2014 the granting of any request to place a shed on a plot has been contingent on such installation.

The use of hose pipes to water plots is prohibited. However, hose pipes can be used to fill water butts.

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New tenants are given advice on how to compost plant material successfully and how to reduce the need for heavy digging.

Whilst the use of pesticides and herbicides is not prohibited all tenants are encouraged to use these sparingly and in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.

Local, qualified beekeepers are encouraged to place hives at each allotment site to help with plant pollination and to support the declining honeybee population.

A poorly draining area at Gipsy Lane has been turned over to a community orchard of local heritage apple trees. In December 2016 this had nineteen fruit trees in it.

A shaded area at St. Paul's Gate is being used by Holt Copse Conservation Volunteers as a nursery for oak trees.

Where practicable areas of each site are allowed to grow wild to provide habitats for insects. At Gipsy Lane and Latimer Road a local scout group has constructed a five-storey 'bug hotel'. There are 'eco-piles' of cut logs at Latimer Road and Ormonde Road.

At five of the sites tenants donate surplus produce to local charities.

New allotment sites within the town

It is the Town Council's policy to acquire new allotment sites within the town boundary commensurate with the perceived demand for plots. New allotment sites will usually become available as part of residential housing developments. The infrastructure of all new sites will be established in conjunction with the housebuilders and Wokingham Borough Council. In December 2016 the Town Council understands that there will be new sites at:

Montague Park **0.38 hectares (ha)**

Kentwood Farm West **Phase 2** **0.28 ha**

In total these two sites will provide 50 additional plots. It is expected that they will be ready to let between in 2022 and 2023 respectively.

The Town Council has asked the developers via Wokingham Borough Council for each site to be 'spade ready' and to have the following:

- flat, even ground with at least 60 cm of sifted topsoil
- plots to be 2.5 poles in size with defined paths, 1 metre wide, between the plots for access for the disabled
- there to be no trees in the vicinity of the allotment boundary or planted within the site
- the boundary to be set with sturdy, metal deer-proof fences, 1.8 metres in height, with lockable gates
- composting or mains water and sewage disposal connected toilets for the disabled

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- centrally located compartmentalized tool/ equipment lockers with an integral rainwater collection system
- a water-butt on each plot with a lockable lid
- a durable hard-standing area for car parking – one space per five plots
- a mains water supply with non-return valve taps for every six plots
- two large outdoor noticeboards

The Town Council has been advised that these sites will come with significant additional funds provided by the housebuilders. The funds are for enhancing the new sites and for improvements to the Town Council's existing allotments.

In order to help expedite the acquisition of the new sites the Town Council will engage with the responsible planners at the Borough Council on a six weekly cycle. This will ensure that the Town Council is fully aware of the handover of the sites so that it can properly and fairly advertise the vacant plots.

Publicizing the availability of the new sites

The Town Council will, in the first instance, advertise the availability of new plots on each housing development to those who reside on the development. It is the policy of the Town Council to engage with these residents via:

- the housebuilders
- residents' associations
- noticeboards at nearby community halls and churches
- direct leafleting to each house and flat
- noticeboards on established and new allotment sites
- social media
- local newspaper articles

As previously laid out the advertising of the plots will highlight the many benefits of allotment gardening. If plots remain vacant on new sites their availability will be advertised to all town residents by the previously mentioned means.

The Town Council will cover new plots with a hard-wearing permeable membrane until they are let.