

## ALLOTMENTS

Allotments and leisure gardens still provide the most common means for most people to gain access to land on which to grow their own food. As such they represent an asset of immeasurable value in terms of providing a route or conduit by which ordinary people can attain a basic level of competence in food-growing, which would then give them confidence to progress to larger, commercial scales of production..

Allotment provision has been enshrined in law for the past century, guaranteeing everybody the right to a plot on demand [on submission of a petition of 12 or more ratepayers' names]. In practice, this led to an average desirable ratio between the concentration of population in a given area and a suitable area of land devoted to allotments, generally interpreted as 4 acres per 1,000 members of the population, although actual provision is much more varied and unequally distributed than this suggests. The gross number of allotments provided in Britain has remained stable throughout this century, at about 500,000, despite a perceived drop in usage and value in modern times.

If a comparison is made with the numbers of people employed in agriculture [150,000] or the number of smallholdings [100,000], it is obvious that more people have access to food-growing opportunities on allotments than by any other means, even taking into account underuse and the use of allotments for purely ornamental growing [estimated to be 50% of the total]. Of the 16 million domestic gardens in the country, very few provide enough soil of sufficient quality to permit the growing of anything but a token amount of food. It might even be possible that allotments represent the greatest area of land under organic cultivation, since obtaining fresh, locally-grown fruit and vegetables, free from additives or contaminants has been the prevailing motivation of the majority of new tenants for the past twenty years. There currently exists an acceptable balance between organic cultivators and those using chemicals on most allotment sites, whereas in the recent past, the preponderance of chemical use did much to overwhelm, discourage and prevent organic culture.

A national review of allotment provision is long overdue. The last major attempt to reassess their structure and function was 30 years ago [the Thorpe Report]. Very few of the recommendations of this parliamentary committee were enacted and the last legislation relevant to allotments dates back to 1950. Despite this absolute official neglect, the indigenous, vernacular culture of allotments is as strong now as it has ever been, although this could be interpreted as strength in and because of adversity.

The most important reform that could be easily achieved to improve the function of the allotment system would be measures to ensure continuity of usage, to pre-empt and avoid the disuse and underuse that is currently widespread. Simple administrative reforms, such as timing of tenancies or acceptance of shared tenancies and subdivided plots, could also do much to ameliorate this situation.

Reform of the anachronistic and frankly incomprehensible standard tenancy agreement between plot-holders and local authorities could contribute to this end amongst others. A draft version of an improved tenancy is included in the second section of this document. Designed to be easily understood, it retains most of the legal tenets stipulated in the original, but includes changes which could improve the situation.

Allotments provide an excellent opportunity for the development of education and training specifically dedicated to the encouragement of organic food growing. Such provision should accept that food-growing is equivalent to a skilled or craft occupation and that growers need to practice for several years to develop a range of abilities. SOFI operates what is in effect a scheme to permit individuals to undertake an apprenticeship in organic growing, learning from more experienced growers, over a period of several years.

It should be noted that the average size of allotments, approximately 300 square meters or one eighth of an acre, is only sufficient to provide a limited amount of produce. When most allotment sites were created, there was considerable demand and this limited area allowed more people to have access. If the grower is trying to maximise one individual's self-sufficiency by cultivating the greatest diversity of crops for as long as possible each year, one half of an acre or 4 plots would provide enough soil to attain this goal.

Although allotments are undoubtedly affordably priced, there are still justifications for subsidised rent, especially for those on low incomes. The price of rented land on an agricultural scale is approximately equivalent to what is paid by plot-holders, at about £200 per acre per year, although allotment soils and sites are rarely of a standard equivalent to agricultural land. Provision should be made both for those unable to maintain a whole allotment and for those who need more space. Facilities provided with allotments are extremely variable and rents reflect this.