

ALLOTMENTS

Miriam McGregor

For most, an allotment gives access to just the right amount of land to feed a family independently. Now that bankrupt councils are selling them off, how can people carry on this necessary tradition? DEBORAH BURN examines the alternatives.

Want to buy an allotment site? Birmingham City Council recently listed Ferndale Allotments in Alum Rock for sale by auction, bids starting at £25,000. Nestled within housing, the land is derelict with no allotments now. This is despite high demand for allotments in the city and with Alum Rock one of the most economically deprived and populous areas of Birmingham. This is a community which could, no doubt like many others, thrive on the well-evidenced health, community and nature benefits of allotments. Instead, in Birmingham, a tract of allotment land will be sold to the highest bidder.

Councils in England and Wales have a statutory provision to consider providing allotments, but waiting lists are high in many areas with few councils installing new allotment sites. It's true that most such sites are in council ownership, with long waiting lists, increasing rents, and storm clouds gathering over council bankruptcy. However, there are alternative models of allotment provision that challenge the council model. This is something I am deeply immersed in, through my work at the non-profit Green Allotments Charity. Here, we are rolling-out an alternative allotment provision model that is non-profit and puts security of tenure first. There are also much-publicised profit-making models being tried out. Backed by venture capitalists, these are making residents — and some councils — twitch when their new plots pop up along the road.

These non-profit and for-profit models of allotment provision are all in response to a broken model of council provision, that is becoming ever more deeply mired in the wider financial risks faced by all councils. This situation is a risk to council allotment tenants and all of the people on waiting lists.

First though, a detailed account of why and how the council model is broken, with some examples that make for sad reading at times but with occasional glimmers of hope.

The Broken Model

Birmingham was the first city to declare 'council bankruptcy' — shorthand for issuing a Section 114 notice. This notice is a council declaration that it cannot commit to any new spending, including a requirement to publish a revised budget within 21 days. Following Birmingham in 2023, six more councils in England have gone bust with many more predicted to follow. Any council in this situation

will inevitably be forced to examine the value of its 'family silver' — especially after 15 years of extreme financial cut-backs by central government. This should not be far from the minds of all folk who admire allotments for their heritage and contemporary non-monetary value as a steady and benign form of land-use bringing multiple benefits to people, cultures, nature, and countless communities.

Council rents, especially in urban areas, increased sharply during the government-enforced 'austerity' years and this has continued into what is now branded 'the cost of living crisis'. Full-cost-recovery is now commonplace for council allotment services and many are outsourced, especially in large urban councils. Although allotment rents have an element of built-in control, based on what people can reasonably be expected to pay, councils have been able to bypass this requirement by using 'add-ons' that technically are not rent increases.

Want an allotment in the urban borough of St Helens on Merseyside? Here, around 25 percent of residents live in 10 percent of the most deprived wards in England. Allotment rent is now £132.50 for a full size 250m² plot, or £66.25 for a half size 125m² plot. Sounds reasonable? You will also need to add £35 and £17.50, respectively, for water. On top of this can you please rummage in your pocket for the £120 one-off "admin charge" and there's another £25 for a key to the allotment site gate. All in all, that is £312.50 to be paid upfront for a full size plot, or £228.75 for a half plot. There are no longer any concessions.

Affordable for some, but certainly not for all. Paying a lump-sum in advance for services is a privilege not always available to people living in economically deprived communities. By the way, even if you can afford the St Helens allotment rent, there are 700 people in front of you on the waiting list. If you can stretch to a holiday, you might actually opt for a staycation because if you miss the all-important email that says you have finally reached the top of the waiting list then you only have 10 days to reply or you are struck off the list immediately. Yet these increased allotment rents and their financially imaginative add-ons will still be insufficient to balance the books for councils faced with bankruptcy.

New Planning System?

In England, council allotments have a small level of protection if the land is already classified as Statutory Allotments. If a

council wants to sell statutory allotment land, it needs the permission of the Secretary of State and, if granted, the council must provide a replacement of equal quality and quantity. Although neither convenient nor sustainable for the community of gardeners on-site, this method does at the very least keep the numbers of plots at the same level albeit in a different and not necessarily useful location.

Spare a thought though for people on the two types of allotment site that are not statutory. Firstly, so-called 'temporary' allotment sites which are always owned by councils and are a 'meanwhile' use. This land was usually acquired for future burial grounds, with allotments as a temporary measure but, in reality, are usually in place for decades as thriving allotment plots. As we will see, one such temporary site is actually 120 years old and about to be closed. Secondly, 'private' allotment sites which as the name suggests are owned by private concerns, be they private landowners, companies, charities, and so on. Private allotment sites can be non-profit or for-profit. Tenants on temporary and private allotment sites have absolutely no protection in law – these sites can be closed with 12 months notice to quit and without any recourse to appeal.

A disposal decision about allotments, no matter the classification of allotment site, is always nested within a set of laws unique to allotments. Although this framework has some teeth, Westminster is busily working out ways to chip away at any regulation or consultee that can get in the way of 'development'. Some of these recent attempts at deregulation are explicitly connected to proposals to amend the National Planning Policy Framework. These proposals have negative knock-on effects for green spaces more generally and, perhaps, provide a clue about dark clouds on the horizon for allotments via the planning system.

Firstly, the disposal requirement for replacing green spaces with that of 'equal quality and quantity' is proposed to become 'either equal quality or quantity.' Secondly, reference to using the planning system to reduce food inequalities has disappeared entirely. Finally, the proposed removal of The Gardens Trust as a statutory consultee in the planning process removes expert voices from the planning process. Tiny adjustments yes, but which could be significantly enabling for a planning team looking to squeeze in the highly profitable needs of a corporate developer into a locale with precious little green spaces amidst an economically deprived community with no access to land. Although these proposals will not directly affect allotments, there is a concern that they hint that allotment law could be next.

This is a steady move towards favouring development over security of tenure for small scale non-commercial local food production. The last time politicians in Westminster even suggested blotting out statutory protection for allotments (in

2011) they bid a hasty retreat following a public outcry led by The National Allotment Society. But we should all be awake to the fact that we may in due course need to fight against a repeal of allotment law to favour development and economic growth.

Can 120 Years Ever Be Temporary?

A popular trope is that allotments are disposed of to make way for some sort of modernising 'development', e.g. housing or a new hospital. In this picture, allotments are often cast as a 'relic' from the past that stops the future from happening. However, there are other threats.

The fragility of the allotment community to a council-landowner decision is being played out for real in Teddington. The London Borough of Richmond upon Thames announced recently that Teddington Cemetery will be extended into Shacklegate Lane Allotments. This is classed as a temporary allotment site, but has actually been allotments for over 120 years – not exactly a 'temporary' land use. Despite a petition, national media attention, and the very broad support of the wider community in Teddington, the council has reiterated its decision and will not budge. The allotments are the last site in Teddington and will soon be lost. There is no right of appeal and no obligation upon the council to provide replacement allotments, because the site is temporary not statutory. This is in spite of the current National Planning Policy Framework declaring allotments to be part of 'healthy, safe and inclusive places'.

Private sites are under threat too and not necessarily because a landowner wants to

sell the land and grab a profit from new housing. Plotolders at Starkholmes Allotments, in Matlock, were evicted after the landowner decided to close the site to 'consolidate business assets' whilst stating he would never sell the land to the allotment association. The case of Starkholmes Allotments is an important one, as it exposes weaknesses within the process of designating land as an Asset of Community Value (ACV), under the Localism Act (2011). This process 'stops the clock' on the sale of allotments, to provide opportunity for the community to buy the land. ACV status was granted to Starkholmes Allotments after a lengthy legal process, which the landowner fought against. However, the site was still lost in spite of being an ACV.

Losing an Asset of Community Value

Key to the loss of Starkholmes Allotments is the landowner's decision to evict the tenants but not to actually sell the land, just 'consolidate business interests', whatever that means. As the land was not going to be sold, the ACV status did not apply, as it only kicks-in when an ACV is put up for sale. The eviction of allotment tenants could not be halted. Immediately after eviction day, the allotments were bulldozed by the landowner.



Peter Nevins

If this land, now empty of allotments, were put on the market or subject to a Compulsory Purchase Order in the future, a key component of the ACV assessment process at that time would be the current land use; if it is not an allotment then ACV would likely not apply. Derbyshire Dales District Council loudly supported the allotment tenants in their fight to save the allotments, throwing a lot of time and tax-payer-funded resources at saving the allotments. Despite having the full support of their council and the additional weight of an ACV, the land was still taken away from allotment tenants.

Govt. Funding Saves Private Allotments

In better news, two private allotment sites have been saved by central government funding – but there is a sting in the tail to this good news. Williton Allotments in Devon and Great Ayton Allotments in North Yorkshire were awarded £30,000 and £191,378, respectively, from the central government Community Ownership Fund. The sting in the tail is that the fund was closed shortly thereafter, leaving more recently threatened allotments sites in limbo. Apparently, the fund or an equivalent will reopen when the Community Empowerment Bill becomes statute, but as this is currently going through legislative process it cannot be said exactly when or even if this will happen.

This is the first time central government has stepped in to save private (non-council) allotment sites from closure. This is, of course, a remarkable achievement for the allotment tenants and the councils that fully supported them. But should allotment tenants on private sites have to go through the stress of site closure and compete against each other in a funding circus in order to survive? Surely there is a better way to provide security of tenure than pitting communities against one another? Should the tax-payer fund the purchase of land when a landowner simply changes their mind about providing allotments? A legitimate concern, however, is that regulating to force private providers to retain allotments might well disincentivise them from providing any new private allotments at all.

Birmingham, Teddington, St Helens, Williton, and Great Ayton plus many more. These cases illustrate the precarity of contemporary allotment provision, rental costs, and tenure. Land rights for allotment tenants - and wannabe allotment gardeners on waiting lists - continue to be precarious, with some potentially even darker clouds on the horizon depending upon how the NPPF is revised and what comes after.

Alternative Models of Provision

For-profit allotments

Allota FutureLand Ltd, trading as Roots Allotments, has garnered much media attention via vocal complaints from local residents about the way in which the company operates — a quick google search will tell the tale from various viewpoints. However, there is far less commentary about how the Roots corporate model operates in relation to security of tenure for the people who garden on their allotment sites. From a land rights perspective, Allota FutureLand Ltd are a private limited company creating new allotment sites on a profit-making basis. The company operates via a subscription model, a business model requiring significant PR and often with high customer churn. Shareholders include a former CEO of Tesco and various venture capitalist companies, in addition to the family who started the business. The company does not buy land for allotments, it rents land from private landowners.

In essence, these are private allotment sites operating for profit. This is not new nor does it conflict with the Allotment Acts. Back in 2006, an enterprising farmer called Maurice Patton set up Ards Allotments in Newtownards, County Down, as a means of agricultural diversification. Plots rents were hundreds of pounds per year at a time when allotment rents were generally less than fifty. Others followed: many are farmers dotted around the UK with small scale allotment operations and charging a wide range of rent prices. Entrepreneurs have come and gone too, such as Rudi Schogger's now dissolved 'The New Allotment Company', which aimed to open a 300 plot allotment site near Tonbridge in Kent in 2010.

However, just like the tenants at non-profit Starkholmes Allotments, tenants at Roots and other for-profit allotments have no protection whatsoever. For-profit allotment sites are technically 'private' sites and, thus, have no security of tenure. Furthermore, Roots tenants generally have an even more precarious tenancy because another layer of land ownership is involved: the landowners renting to Roots could, if they wished, terminate their leases with Allota FutureLand Ltd.

Housing developer provision

New allotment sites are being created in some new housing developments, often via Section 106 agreements. Delays can be an issue: Harlow Council filed a High Court Injunction against Persimmon, Barratt David Wilson and Taylor Wimpey when new allotments (and other infrastructure) failed to



Golden Rules for Diggers



Left: (original caption): The correct position for digging, which if adopted will prove most efficient. Right: just give it some welly!
Top: and for heaven's sake don't try to dig in the rain.



Section 8 of NPPF December 2025 :

Promoting healthy and safe communities

96. Planning policies and decisions should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places which:

a) promote social interaction, including opportunities for meetings between people who might not otherwise come into contact with each other – for example through mixed-use developments, strong neighbourhood centres, street layouts that allow for easy pedestrian and cycle connections within and between neighbourhoods, and active street frontages;

b) are safe and accessible, so that crime and disorder, and the fear of crime, do not undermine the quality of life or community cohesion – for example through the use of well-designed, clear and legible pedestrian and cycle routes, and high quality public space, which encourage the active and continual use of public areas; and

c) enable and support healthy lives, through both promoting good health and preventing ill-health, especially where this would address identified local health and well-being needs and reduce health inequalities between the most and least deprived communities – for example through the provision of safe and accessible green infrastructure, sports facilities, local shops, access to healthier food, **allotments** and layouts that encourage walking and cycling.

materialise at new development Gilden Park, Essex. The new allotments did finally open, but only with its first growing season in 2025 almost a decade after planning permission.

By only increasing allotment provision when also increasing the total number of dwellings in a settlement does little to alleviate already long waiting lists. Yet, placing the onus onto developers to create new allotments is fast becoming the *de facto* method of new council provision. Adding a line to the Local Plan to the effect that new allotments are desirable, but will only be created by developers, is starting to become a standard line in Local Plans too. Of course, this can only happen if and when new developments are actually built.

It is to whom the allotments are legally handed over that can cause tenure problems with allotments created by developers. If the developer retains ownership, the new allotments become a 'private' allotment site with no protection for tenants. Should the developer transfer the land to the local council, the allotments could become statutory, affording some protection. At present, a mixture of both is happening, with no firm pattern to these decisions and leaving a patchwork effect of tenure for tenants on developer-created allotment sites.

Non-profit provision

In our work at Green Allotments Charity, we have carefully examined all of the issues I've outlined in this article. Our response is a long-term strategy to buy land, via philanthropy instead of renting, and to open new allotment sites with security of tenure and grass roots community involvement in what is an entirely non-profit venture.



Nikki McClure (papercut)

Many people just enjoy digging, and contact with real earth.

First and foremost, our model is firmly packaged in a non-profit ethos controlled within charity regulation. Choosing non-profit charitable status was an important step towards ensuring the charity's land could only ever be taken out of allotment usage by a Compulsory Purchase Order.

Secondly comes the most important concern of security of tenure and with this our bold stance of providing 30-year peppercorn leases with intention to renew. This sets in place a long-term commitment to land being used as allotments, giving security of tenure for allotment tenants and also land-use stability for the local community. Most council leases for allotments sites are much shorter, often with a break after seven years, something which deters independent funders. Furthermore, if you are a volunteer in an allotment society with a council lease to manage the site, you see a large percentage of plot rent income disappearing back to the council after all of your voluntary endeavour - leaving little budget for site maintenance and community activities.

Finally, and very exciting for the land and people, is that allotment sites created by Green Allotments Charity have community-led management by the gardeners at its heart. Local people acting as guardians and stewards of the land, making decisions that keep the land in good heart and all carefully curated by our Tenancy Agreement which favours biodiversity over chemicals: we ask our tenants to garden without pesticides and herbicides for enhanced and increased biodiversity. Our model means plot rent can be reinvested into the allotment site by the community of gardeners. This means no dereliction and an opportunity for community-led projects that help create long-lasting bonds and friendships.

Green Allotments' strategy means there is no ambiguity about landowner probity and no tinges of profit making. We believe this will lead to the most secure allotment provision model in the UK.

Dr Deborah Burn has been employed nationally in the allotments movement for over 20 years, and is co-author of the Local Government Association's good practice guide for the management of allotments. She has a PhD on informal social cooperation amongst allotment gardeners, having been one since 1995.



Let The Worms Do The Work

The lost art of building hot compost heaps, using MAY E BRUCE's method.

First lesson: you can't do it alone. You need little helpers: worms. Like all forms of life, worms need five things to thrive: air, water, warmth, food and mates. As each worm is both male and female, the number of eggs they produce is doubled, so every worm is both Grandfather and Grandmother to multitudes. Given that moles, pigs and badgers eat earthworms by the pound, this is a good thing. Other hazards include worm-specific poisons applied to lawns to get rid of worm-casts, and farmers, plus 'horseyulturalists' who dose animals with verm[worm]icides which pass through their gut and into the soil. Yes, life as a worm has many terrors but they carry on regardless. Your task as a gardener and soil-curator is to give them the happiest possible conditions in which to do their elemental work of recycling old life into new.

AEROBIC COMPOSTING is all about **AIR** which enables all the helpful bacterial processes and the worms to function, and generates **HEAT ENERGY**. **AIR** is brought into the heap by **LAYERING** to create air pockets. Herein lies the secret — don't just chuck stuff on as you go, but save piles of different materials separately, and then build. Also, poke holes into it. Turning is helpful if you can be bothered. **WATER** is essential to life and the heap must be **DAMP**. Each layer should be watered as the heap is built. **WATERLOGGING** however is fatal as the water occupies the air spaces and creates anaerobic conditions, slime and stink.

TO START you need an enclosure (three upturned pallets is ideal) *no bigger* than 3 ft. square. The size is relative to the amount of material you can produce; but the principle is to **STACK IT HIGH**, and keep the **SIDES STRAIGHT** to minimise exterior surfaces (which won't rot down).

The structure is **VERTICAL**. Worms don't do sideways. They ascend & descend chewing up and mixing the layers. By providing a mixture of materials you make their lives more interesting. The tall heap generates and contains heat. A shallow spread-out heap never gets a hot centre. The heap should always be kept **COVERED** while it's being built up with a tarp, (or large cardboard sheet) (a) as a blanket to hold in the heat (b) to prevent waterlogging by rain (c) to deter burrowing animals.

DRAINAGE: The base of the heap must be straight onto earth, with lots of deep holes made by a crowbar. This also encourages worms to ascend into the heap. **HEAT:** a well-built heap will reach temperatures up to 63 degrees (ideally 72, the same as pasteurisation) which is enough to kill off weed seeds and roots. Heat also provides energy for soil bacteria to breed and break down all detritus.

Materials = Worm Food.

All and every kind of matter of vegetable origin is good; it's all "carbon". Feather duvets, seaweed, autumn leaves, greengrocers' leftovers. If you're not confident of reaching high heat levels, exclude nettle roots or seedy weeds, brambles etc: burn these and add the ash in blobs (not a carpeting layer) to the heap. **WOOD ASH** is basically **POTASH** an essential plant nutrient. **CHARCOAL FINES** aerate. **LEAVES:** worms love leaves, they use them to line their burrows for a cosy night's sleep, (Darwin q.v.) Leaves can be added at any stage of decomposition. Hard leaves eg rhododendron may be better burnt. Ditto twigs. **GARDEN WASTE:** Coarse stalks eg Brussels sprouts should be smashed up with a sledgehammer/sharp spade or better still a shredding machine. **EARTH:** lifeless dusty earth still contains vital minerals and will be revived by composting. **GRASS & LAWNMOWINGS:** mix with other fibrous stuff to prevent a soggy anaerobic mat forming, or ideally,

pass through the gut of a ruminant to get extra added bacteria / pre-digestion and convert to manure. **MANURE:** even small amounts are hugely beneficial. It contains a vast microbiome of bacteria which enliven all soil and growth processes hugely.

NITROGENOUS WEEWEE: Urine breaks down rapidly into ammonia ie nitrogen, invaluable for fertility, also speeds up decomposition. The heat of the heap destroys any pathogens. Ditto "Humanure" provided your heat is high and continuous for at least two weeks.

COMPOSTING NO-NOS: Rats are attracted to nest in heaps by the warmth, but if there is nothing for them to eat they'll go elsewhere. So, **NO COOKED FOOD OR GRAINS** should ever go into a heap. Rats can also be deterred by frequent crow-barring, or turning. **CARDBOARD** is over-rated: unless ripped up, it forms a worm-proof barrier. **NEWSPAPER?** Printer's ink is toxic. **MOULDY HAY:** contains spores which cause "Farmer's Lung". If using, break up into

small chunks. Don't breathe in. So-called **BIODEGRADABLE PLASTICS** are probably corn starch — OK. **CARPETS** — even "wool" ones probably have a plastic backing. Treat all these substances as toxic whatever you put in your soil ends up in your food, and you.

TO FINISH; To function properly the heap should be at least four feet high, more is better. It will shrink, by a lot. Drop deep holes into it with a crowbar, and optionally pour in your liquid nitrogen (wee) and any biodynamic preparations you may fancy, such as May E Bruce's herbal concoctions. Cover the heap with tarp and a few rocks to stop it blowing away. Now start another one. Check temperature by spraying tarp with water: steam should rise. In very dry weather also spray surrounding woodwork to prevent spontaneous combustion. In approximately three months (longer in winter) your compost should be a dark, homogenous, crumbly, life-infested soil re-generator. Chocolate cake for the Plant Kingdom. Just like cake, you can never have too much.



Even the most scientifically constructed compost heap starts looking a bit wild after a while. That's because it's alive.

Miriam McGregor