

## **Growing in the Community: The Longer View**

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A decade has passed since the British Parliamentary Select Committee Inquiry into *The Future for Allotments* called for the preparation of a good practice guide for the management of allotments in England and Wales, which was eventually published by the Local Government Association (the equivalent of CoSLA south of the border) in 2001 under the title *Growing in the Community*. The guide was produced in the context of ongoing losses of sites and the urgent need to promote allotments if the decline was to be reversed – by attracting new ploholders and widening the circle of stakeholders who might benefit from a reversal of fortune. The focus of the guide was on strategies to identify and unleash what the Ministry with oversight for allotments regarded as a latent demand for gardening space. The guide emphasized the importance of networking within and between local authorities, to foster a shared appreciation of how allotments might help deliver a diverse range of agendas (such as health, biodiversity and social inclusion), and encouraging ploholders to play a greater part in managing their own sites, as the most effective promoters of allotment gardening at the local level.

Over subsequent years many local authorities in England and Wales have put allotment strategies in place, or incorporated allotments into broader green space strategies, a developed mirrored in Scotland, although *Growing in the Community* was not written with the Scottish context in mind. The guide sold well, and sold out, the pretext for the Local Government Association to commission a Second Edition, published in March 2008\*, which is set against a very different background.

The intervening years have seen a significant interest in “growing your own”, fuelled by increasing numbers opting into a greener lifestyle, whether through ethical choice or in emulation of kitchen celebrities. An increased in demand was flagged in the *The Future for Allotments*, but rejected by the government of the day as unsupported by facts. In a marked about change, however, the Ministerial preface to the Second Edition of *Growing in the Community* acknowledges increasing demand as fact.

The recent success of allotments can be regarded as a historic shift. In the past increased demand was associated with bad times - recession and warfare - but the current expansion has taken place in the context of growing wealth, reversing the relationship between the economic cycle and the popularity of allotments. There have even been instances of developers (long considered the bad guys in the plot) designing allotments into new estates to increase their attractiveness. Waiting lists for allotments are growing across England and Wales, in cities north and south and in the countryside, and have even been closed in some areas where waits have stretched beyond a decade. The original *Growing in the Community* made no reference to new sites, other than when ploholders are forced to relocate, in the interests of being taken seriously. For the Second Edition, however, the provision of new sites was uppermost in government thinking.

Since the publication of the Second Edition, of course, economic conditions have changed radically throughout the United Kingdom, but rather than suppressing demand, the threat of recession and rising food prices has added further fuel, as more people see allotments as both green and thrifty. In short, the outlook for allotments, for good or ill, has rarely looked so promising.

And yet, growing popularity also brings new problems and new risks, which suggest further strategic thinking might be in order. Let's consider two issues – sustainability and comparative advantage.

By sustainability, I refer not to a narrow ecological definition, but to the capacity to generate the evidence and arguments necessary for allotments to be retained. Both editions of *Growing in the Community* praise the diverse benefits of allotments and the importance of engaging with a range of stakeholders. That diversity may be at risk, however, from growing waiting lists and a narrow view of allotments that waiting lists (and green advocacy of “local food”) empower, a view that focuses on whether allotments are cultivated “properly” to maximise food production, without addressing the diversity of benefits and needs and indeed the diversity of gardening cultures to be found in Britain. While the Second Edition of *Growing in the Community* includes reference to inspiring projects on allotments for the dispossessed, the drug dependent and the ex-offender, in truth, these proved much harder to find than for the original edition, as land once set aside for activities like this has been reclaimed for “proper” gardeners. The danger is that this one-track focus on food production puts at risk the diversity of support from a range of stakeholders, untroublesome in the short term, but if the weather changes, where are the alternative discourses that will support the demand for gardening space? It as if we were in 1939, launching into “Dig for Victory”. But after 1945, the will to dig gradually ebbed away over half a century. Sustainability is about redundancy, not of the economic kind that will fuel further demand for allotments in the short term, but the redundancy that comes from a diversity of views and practices, by turns active or dormant, each awaiting its moment to justify the retention of allotments, and the only true guarantor of security in the long run.

As for comparative advantage, in the longer view we must consider what allotments can do, but also what they can do better than other forms of activity or land use, things that we might lose track of in an era of rapid change.

Those of us who feed the press are familiar with the annual “spring story”, the good news (now gone rather stale) about allotments no longer being the domain of the elderly “flat caps”, thanks to growing numbers of women (usually young and professional) taking to the spade – or the no-dig. As a diversification of the allotment community this is indeed good news. But remember that during the long years of decline it was the “flat caps” who kept a toe-hold on the sites that survived; their contribution was vital for the sustainability of allotment gardening. And perhaps it will be again.

In the summer of 2007 I took part in a seminar organised by the Nordic Federation of Allotment Gardeners, on a rather wind-tossed ferry plying the narrow seas between

Denmark and Norway (no risk of being distracted by vegetables there), which focussed on how allotments might contribute to the achievement of the key European Union agendas for the future.

First came climate change and local environmental action. As a source of comparative advantage for allotment gardens, this one is uncertain. In the original *Growing in the Community*, Local Agenda 21 was given a central role. Today, who can remember it? And while much attention is given to carbon footprints and the advantages of “local food” over vegetables transported 5000 miles to our plates, 99% of that advantage can be achieved by transporting food only 50 miles – a definition of “local” that undermines the case for provision within the most expensive and congested part of that final 1%, particularly where allotments are in competition with the logic of the urban land market.

Second, we looked at community cohesion. Allotment gardeners are rightly proud of the diversity of origins of people who can be found negotiating a peaceful coexistence on allotment sites across the United Kingdom. But this form of cohesion is threatened, as noted earlier, by the narrowness of view that waiting lists engender, and the definition of “proper” cultivation that can disguise a selective preference between allotment cultures. And, as with climate change, allotments may well be a comparatively expensive way to deliver cohesion within the broader community.

Which left the third key agenda – demographic change. While migration and community cohesion are inextricably linked, the demographic change of greater importance in the long term, at every scale from the health of the macro-economy down to local service provision, is the ageing of populations, and in particular, the necessity to encourage *active* ageing, to generate an older public that is physically, mentally and spiritually healthy, for the sake of every individual, but that in macroeconomic terms is also affordable, at a decent standard of living, in a competitive global economic environment. Allotments have been celebrated of late as no longer being an “empire of the elderly”, but perhaps that is where their strongest comparative advantage lies. We have been slow to recognise this, but others have not: Japan, for example, has a growing number of “silver allotments”, sites that are for the exclusive use of older citizens.

People in retirement, or moving in that direction, are not only a key market for allotments, but also a huge asset, bringing with them skills not just in horticulture but from a great range of backgrounds which can be put to good use in effective management of sites. The trick, however, will be to realise the significant benefits for allotments of engaging with the active ageing agenda, while avoiding the risk (that exclusive use might well encourage) of reverting to a new monoculture of outlook – the monoculture we’ve already experienced at the end of the long decades of postwar decline. What is required from the new empire of the elderly is a sense, not of exclusive ownership and control, but of wise stewardship for the benefit of all, and for the long term that will be populated by our grandchildren.

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\* *Growing in the Community*, Second Edition, co-authored by Richard Wiltshire and Deborah Burn, can be ordered from LGconnect at 020 7664 3131, price £25 (£15 to LGA members and not-for-profit organisations). Please ask for LGA code EN038.