The Findings of Bath Allotments Association's Questionnaire

To better understand the views and priorities of allotment holders and prospective allotment holders in the BANES area, Bath Allotments Association (BAA), with the assistance of the BANES Allotments Officer, sent out a short questionnaire, which we titled Allotments of the Future. Click this link for an Executive Summary.

The Respondents (Appendix 1: Table 1)

We were pleased to receive 508 responses, just under three quarters of which came from plot holders on sites run by BANES Council, 21% from those on the BANES Council waiting list for allotments and the remainder on privately owned sites, predominantly St Stephens. The B&NES Allotments Officer estimated that there were around 1500 recipients of the email he sent out on our behalf, about1,000 tenants and 500 on the waiting list for an allotment in our area. Respondents were distributed across all the 23 sites run by the Council (see Appendix 1). About 70% of respondents walk to their allotment sites, with 24% using a car and the remainder cycling. Most respondents (87%) get to their plots in under 15 minutes with the rest only taking between 15 and 30 minutes.

Those on the waiting list for allotments and been on the list for an average of just over a year but, as might be expected there was a wide distribution with some individuals having recently joined the list with others waiting 4 years or more. Some of those evicted from Combe Down were now back on the waiting list due to an absence of spaces on plots that side of the City.

We asked respondents to identify their age group to discern whether there were any discernible differences in priorities between younger and older allotmenteers. There was a good age range among respondents, which we feel reflects the multi-generational demand for allotments. 35% of respondents were over 65, 45% were aged between 45 and 65 and 19% were 25-45. The small remainder were under 25 or preferred not to give their age.

When asked about the motivation for having or wanting a plot, the overwhelming majority of respondents felt that growing ones' own fruit and vegetables was the key motivator with 347 (68%) reporting it was of major importance, rising to 92 % when the 'of some importance' response was added in. This is reassuring in that it suggests that

the original 'raison d'etre' for allotments is still the main driving force behind allotment take-up. It is interesting to compare this response with that of the question on reducing food miles and carbon footprint, where 187 (37%) respondents felt this was very important and 156 (31%) felt it was of some importance. The survey suggests that cultivating an allotment is an important way of alleviating stress (very important to just under half of respondents) with access to nature and wildlife following close behind (very important to 229 (45%)) and access to personal leisure space (very important to 215 respondents). Exercise and fitness (very important to 181) and being part of a community (most important to 160 respondents) were deemed slightly less important.

Overall, respondents continue to value allotments primarily as places to grow food, while also recognising their benefits for wellbeing, exercise, biodiversity and community.

Current Allotment Rules (Appendix 2: Charts 1-6)

We were clear to point out that Council run allotments are subject to statutory legislation which affords legal protection to tenants but also dictates many of the current allotment rules, for example, that at least 75% of plot area should be under cultivation during the growing season. However, we were keen to glean some information on attitudes towards grey areas in the rules, like monoculture, and to some of the apparent breeches we commonly see on sites, for example, encroachment of lawns and seating areas into growing space.

The jury is out on monoculture. While around 43% of respondents didn't think it was OK, many were neutral (33%) and some had no strong objections (26%) – see Chart 1. Attitudes were firmer on using commercial gardeners to tend plots on a regular basis. 65% of respondents felt this was not OK with only 20% thinking it was acceptable. (See Chart 2). There was also a degree of consensus that the encroachments of lawns and leisure areas on to allotment growing spaces should be discouraged with only around 21% of respondents being more positively disposed towards leisure space displacing some growing space. (See Chart 3).

There was substantial support for environmentally responsible allotment management. Approximately 69% of responses rated organic practices or restrictions on chemicals highly (Chart 4) while 63% gave high priority to biodiversity (See Chart 5). Around 65% supported wildflowers and wilder areas (See Chart 6), even where these might reduce the available growing space.

Overall, respondents expressed differing views about the balance between productive cultivation, leisure and wildlife. Some wanted stronger limits on leisure uses that

displace growing space, while others valued flowers, wildlife habitats and less intensively cultivated areas.

The open question on allotment rules produced a wide variety of responses covering myriad issues but there were some recurring themes.

Joint tenancies – there were several calls for the rules to be changed to allow partners or co-workers to be included in the tenancy so that they had the right to continue on the plot if the original tenant gave up. The Association has already asked the Council to make this change.

Enforcement of the rules – many of the comments were not about the rules themselves but about the fact that the rules were not perceived as being enforced consistently and fairly. Concerns were raised about plot turnover times/abandoned plots; path encroachment and failure of tenants to strim side paths; accumulation on non-allotment rubbish on plots; shed sizes (large sheds and polytunnels going unchallenged)

Ban on use of chemicals; people asked for the use of glyphosates and other chemicals to be banned on allotments

Bonfires: A controversial issue. On balance, marginally more people wanting a complete ban on bonfires relative to those wanting the ban on bonfires during spring and summer months lifted

The 75% cultivation rule: some respondents favoured a more 'laissez faire' approach, permitting those who lived in properties without outdoor space to use allotments as leisure gardens, others wanting special dispensation for special circumstances e.g. illness or devoting more space to wildflowers etc

Sheds and Polytunnels:: surprisingly there were a number of comments challenging the rule about shed colours – several respondents wanted to paint their sheds in bold colours and felt the rules around muted colours was inappropriate. Others commented on the permitted size of sheds and polytunnels and their positioning – they wanted to install structures on smaller plots

Water: perhaps unsurprisingly given the very dry summer a number of respondents wanted the ban on the use of hose pipes on allotments lifted either generally or by special dispensation e.g. to those who were elderly or disabled in some way.

Overall, respondents broadly support environmentally responsible management and viewed access to water and consistent enforcement of rules as key. There is a minority of respondents who finds some of the rule irksome, particularly if the reasoning behind the rule isn't immediately obvious.

Facilities and Services (Appendix 3: Charts 7-9)

As Charts 7 in Appendix 3 indicates, the service that plot-holders value above all else is access to water. Given the very dry summers we have experienced recently, this isn't surprising, but it reinforces the importance of BAA's recent initiatives providing subsidised water butts, IBCs and structures that facilitate the capture of rainwater during the wetter months. In order of importance the next priority for our respondents is the provision of woodchip and leaf mulch. Changes in Council policy appear to have reduced the supplies coming to allotments recently which is something our team has taken up with the Council and continues to monitor. The support for nature theme apparent in the earlier responses also comes through here, with many ranking the provision of wildlife corridors on sites as very important.

Most plot-holders are happy with the size of their plot (Chart 8) with the most common plot size being between 65 and 125 square metres (Chart 9), rather smaller than the traditional full-size plot which, in the past, was around 250 square metres.

Allotment Pricing and Management (Appendix 4: Charts 10-13)

Most plot-holders consider current rents reasonable (Chart 10), with annual charges most commonly ranging from £60 to £120 (Chart 11). When asked about charges for specific services, such as rubbish removal (Chart 12), respondents showed the strongest support for a deposit paid at the start of a tenancy and refunded when the tenant leaves the plot in good condition. Although sensible in principle, such a scheme might be difficult for site owners, particularly the Council, to administer under current arrangements because it requires more tenancy inspections and staff input than currently available.

Respondents most often preferred a hybrid management model over either full Council control or complete self-management (Chart 13). However, responses to the open question revealed more nuanced views. The key findings from the open comments section were:

1. Council-led management is strongly supported, because it is seen as impartial, affordable and able to ensure equal access.

2. A hybrid Council + plot-holder/site representative model is the most frequently suggested alternative.
3. Several people favour site committees or representatives handling local/day-to-day issues while the Council retains overall responsibility.
4. There is considerable opposition to private/commercial management, with concerns about:
    - Profit taking and higher prices
    - Loss of community control
    - Reduced accessibility
    - Potential development of allotment land for commercial purposes.

A few respondents support self-management or tenant committees, particularly where existing arrangements work well, but recognise the need for clear rules and Council oversight.

Several respondents noted that different sites may need different management arrangements rather than a single model for all sites. In contrast, however, there is also concern that committee-based management could become elitist or exclusionary, potentially disadvantaging older people or less vocal tenants.

Other themes evident in the answers to the open question were:

Dealing with vacant and neglected plots - this was one of the strongest recurring concerns. Respondents want:

- Much faster identification and reallocation of abandoned/uncultivated plots.
- More vigorous or regular inspections.
- Vacant plots cleared before being offered to new tenants.
- Site representatives to help identify neglected plots.
- Better consideration of the impact of weeds from neglected plots on neighbouring tenants.
- Shorter waiting lists and potentially making more land available.
- Greater flexibility around plot sizes, including half plots, micro-plots and shared **3.**

Improving communication and representation. Suggestions include:

- Site representatives acting as a link between tenants and the Council.
- Regular meetings between plot holders and Council/parish representatives.
- WhatsApp or other communication groups.
- A named Council/Site owner contact for each site.
- Greater transparency around inspections, plot allocation and waiting lists.
- Tenant votes or consultation on significant decisions.

- Clear explanations from the Council when requests for improvements cannot be fulfilled.

Some respondents are wary of WhatsApp groups and tenant committees becoming dominated by a small number of vocal or "powerful" individuals.

Funding and resources

There is a strong message that whatever management structure is adopted, it needs adequate funding and staffing. Several comments suggest that some current problems stem from Council under-resourcing, rather than necessarily from the management model itself.

Ideas include:

- Dedicated funding for allotments.
- Council provision of compost, mulch and woodchip.
- Occasional skips for waste.
- Better maintenance of paths, hedges and access areas.
- Shared equipment such as mowers, strimmers and rotavators, potentially managed through a community shed.
- Tenant associations sourcing materials more cheaply where appropriate.

Rules and enforcement There is support for consistent and effective enforcement, particularly around cultivation requirements. Of particular concern was:

- Weeds and neglected plots.
- Trees that become overgrown or cause excessive shading.
- Rubbish, plastic, netting and hazardous materials.
- Maintenance of shared paths.

There is also criticism of the tone of enforcement notices. One respondent felt that threatening letters could discourage new tenants who are still establishing their plots. A recurring suggestion is for enforcement to be firm but more understanding, allowing for holidays, illness or the difficulties of bringing an initially neglected plot back into cultivation.

Environment and biodiversity - one particularly detailed response argues that allotments could contribute much more strategically to Biodiversity Net Gain, climate action and food strategy objectives.

Ideas include:

- Site-specific management plans.
- Better use of non-plot areas.
- Wildlife habitats and corridors.

- Ponds and improved hedgerows.
- Communal spaces and storage.
- More sustainable/regenerative growing.
- Better planning of new allotment sites around green infrastructure.

Overall The strongest recurring concerns relate to consistent enforcement of the rules, access to water and materials, and greater flexibility where personal circumstances or site conditions justify it. The preference was to keep Council oversight and ownership, but strengthen tenant involvement in local management. There is little appetite for full privatisation, and considerable concern that a profit-driven model would undermine affordability and community access. A hybrid model involving Council staff, site representatives and/or tenant committees appears to have the broadest support, provided responsibilities are clearly defined and decision-making remains transparent and inclusive.

Priorities on Sites (Appendix 5: Chart 14)

As might be expected priorities vary a great deal by site and this will be the subject of further analysis in due course. In general, the key priorities centre on dealing with neglected plots, reducing theft and vandalism, dealing with trees outside plots and ensuring adequate water supplies. Most of these themes have recurred throughout the survey.

Other Comments including what is working well

The final open question produced a variety of positive comments which included:

- Strong praise for some individual Council staff members and site representatives;
- Council management working well.
- The current site-representative system being considered particularly valuable.
- Existing tenant committees working successfully on some sites.
- Some respondents describing their allotment as extremely well managed.
- Commercial/community models such as Roots being recognised as providing excellent facilities and support, although their cost is seen as too high for many people.

Informing Discussions with the Council

The survey has provided the BAA with some useful insights into plot-holders and prospective tenants priorities that will shape our policies and will also inform our discussions with the Council on allotment management plans. Some of the key takeaways in terms of the latter are:

- **Keep Council oversight and ownership of allotments but strengthen tenant involvement in local management. There** is little appetite for full privatisation, and considerable concern that a profit-driven model would undermine affordability and community access. A hybrid model involving Council staff, site representatives and/or tenant committees appears to have the broadest support, provided responsibilities are clearly defined and decision-making remains transparent and inclusive.
- **The biggest practical priorities are faster reallocation of abandoned plots, better inspection and enforcement, improved communication, adequate funding, and better maintenance of communal areas.** Respondents also want greater flexibility around plot sizes and sharing and see significant opportunities for allotments to contribute to biodiversity, food, climate and community objectives.
- **Any tenant-led model would need safeguards** against cliques, favouritism and overly dominant individuals, with clear constitutions, elections/representation, transparent decisions and continued Council oversight.

In short: the comments don't suggest that people want the Council to simply hand allotments over to tenants. They suggest that people want the Council to remain accountable while making much better use of the knowledge, enthusiasm and capacity of the people who actually use the sites.

Appendix 1

Site	No of respondents	Site	No of respondents
Abbey View	16	Lower Common East	47
Avon Park	6	Lower Common West	10
Bathampton	8	Lyncombe Hill Farm	13
Bloomfield	45	Lyncombe Vale	2
Brookfield Park	8	Mendip Gardens	2
Canal Gardens	16	Monksdale	40
Claremont	6	Moorfields	8
Corston View	5	Ring Common	20
Eastfield	6	Roots	14
Fairfield Park & Valley	16	St Stephens	15
Foxhill	4	Bay Tree	2
Hampton Row	3	Bathwick	2
High Common	8	Waiting list	104
King George's Road	6	Miscell	5
Larkhall	31	Not disclosed	51

Appendix 2: Views on Allotment Rules

The scale on Charts 1-7 is left to right strongly disagree to strongly agree

Chart 1: Monoculture

8. It is OK to grow a single crop (monoculture) e.g. just grapes or only potatoes

504 responses

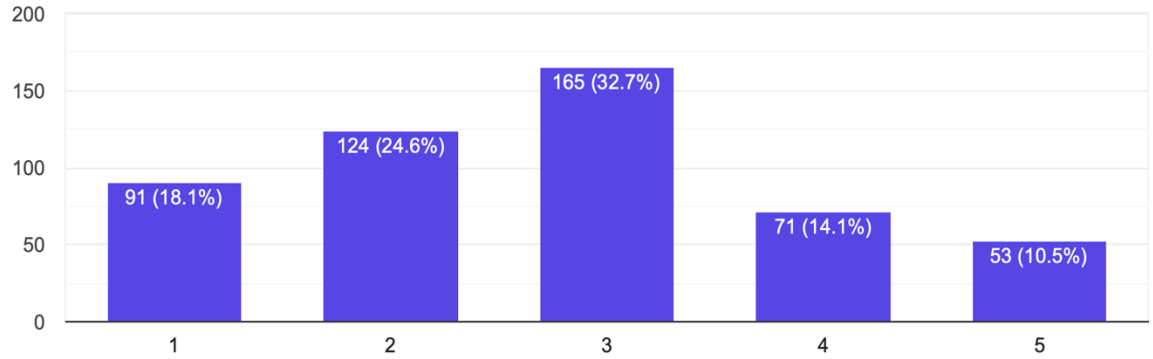


Chart 2: Using commercial gardeners on a regular basis

9. It is OK to pay a commercial gardener to look after your allotment on a regular basis

504 responses

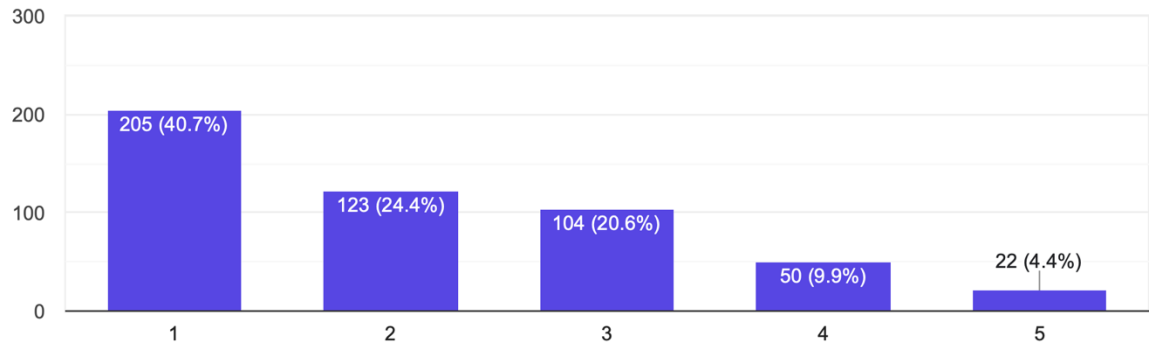


Chart 3: Lawns and Leisure Spaces

12. The encroachment of leisure areas (e.g. lawns, seating areas, summer houses expanding to more than a quarter of the plot) into growing space should be strongly discouraged.

505 responses

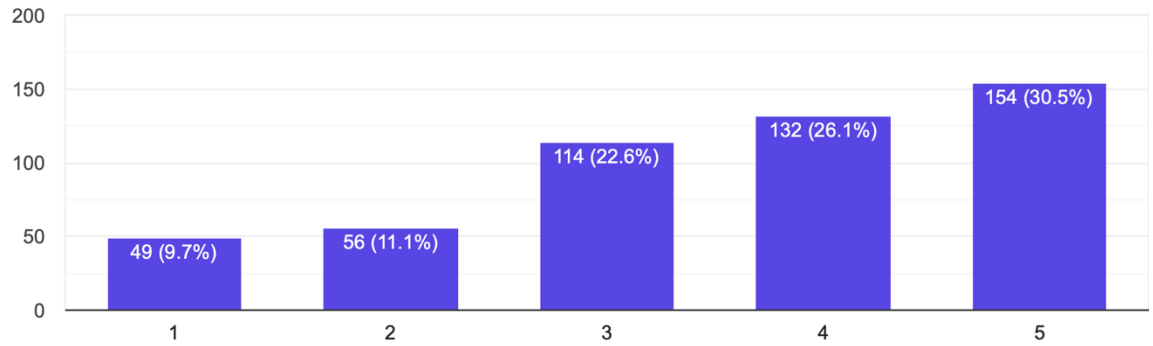


Chart 4: Restrictions on Pesticides and Chemicals

10. All sites should move toward organic practices with restrictions on the use of pesticides and chemicals

505 responses

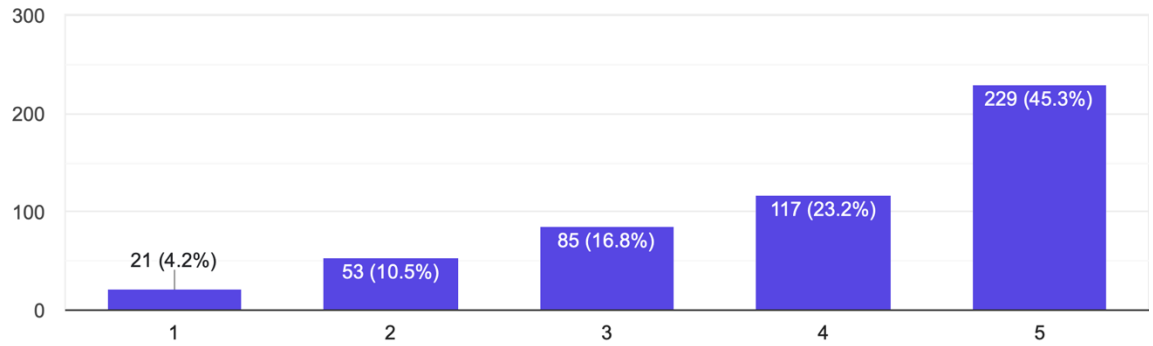


Chart 5: Greater Focus on Biodiversity at Site Level

11. There should be a greater focus on biodiversity in the management of sites.
504 responses

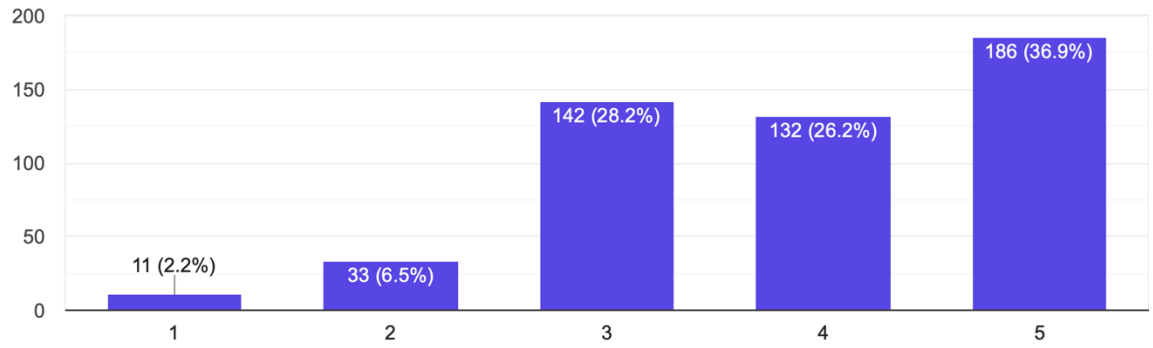
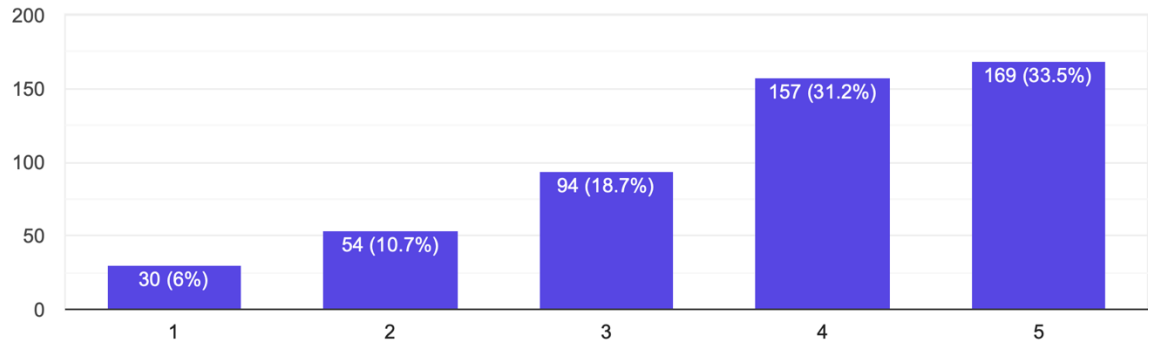


Chart 6: Planting Wildflowers and Leaving Areas Wild

13. Planting wildflowers and leaving areas wild on plots to encourage pollinators and wildlife is acceptable even if it reduces produce growing space to below 75% of total plot area.
504 responses



Appendix 3: Facilities and Service

Chart 7: The Importance of Various Facilities and Service

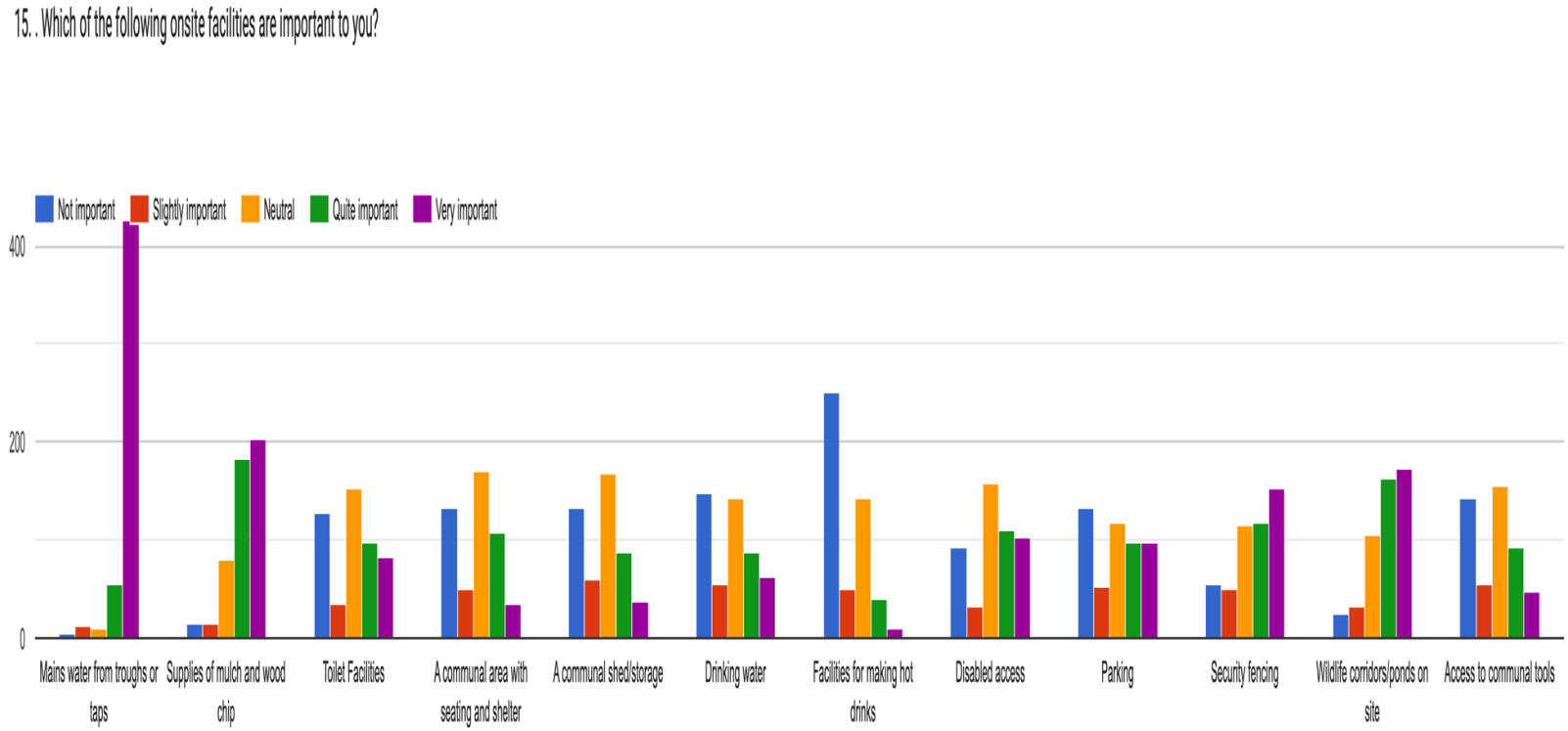


Chart 8: Plot Size

16. What is the size of your plot?

502 responses

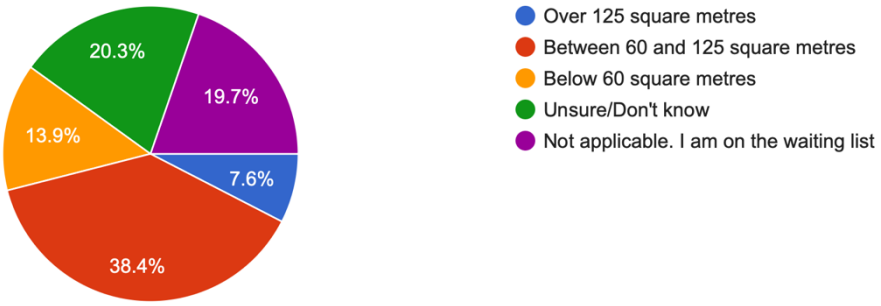
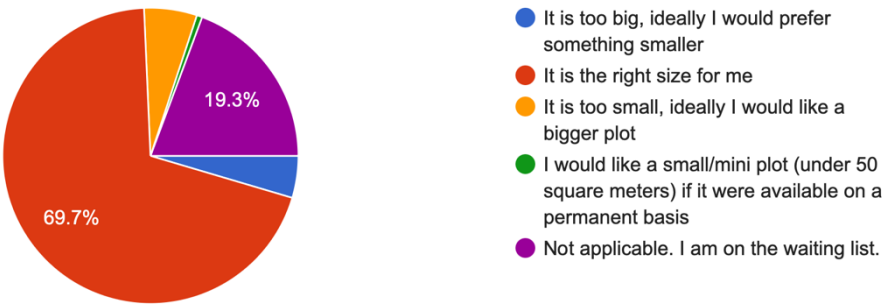


Chart 9: Plot size preferences

17. What do you think of the current size of your plot?

502 responses



Appendix 4: Allotments Pricing and Management

Charts 10-14

Charts 10- Views on Rental Charges

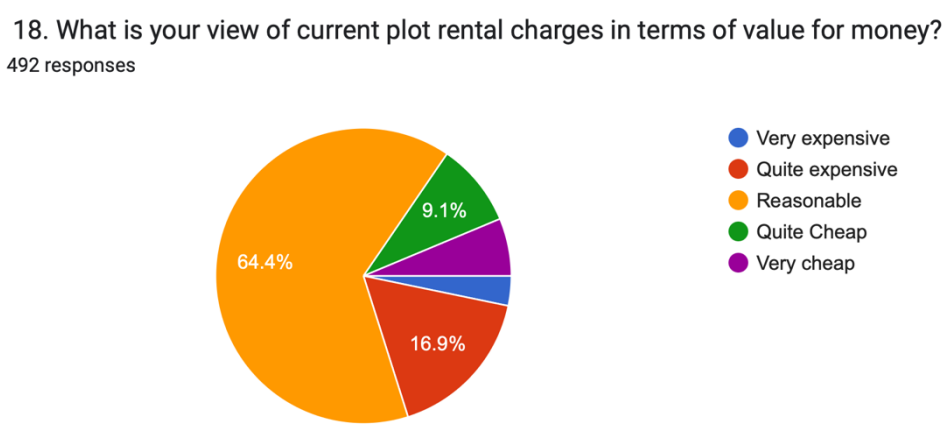


Chart 11: Allotment Rental Charges

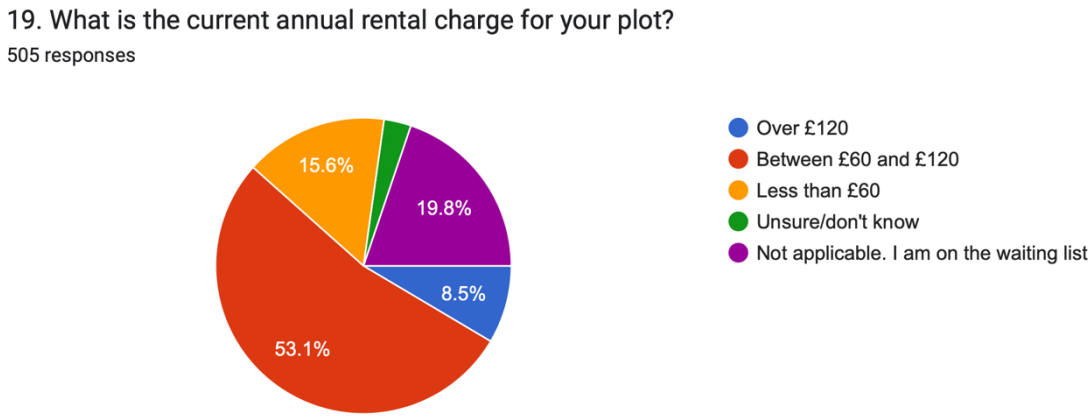


Chart 12: Charging for Specific Services

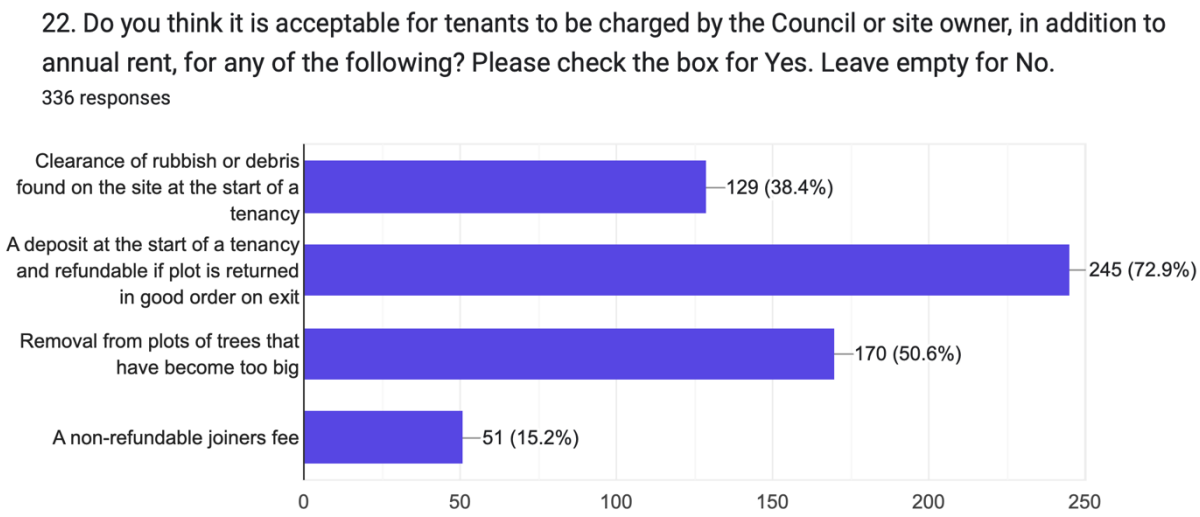


Chart 13: Allotment Management

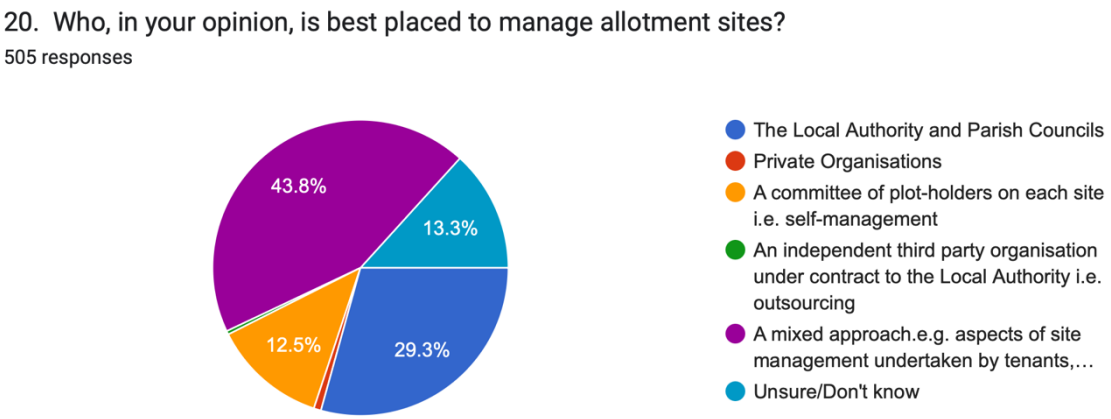


Chart 14: Priorities on Sites

