**BHAF Recommendations on Plot Size** Mark Carroll, Allan Brown, Land Group, BHAF Committee

Traditionally a standard full size allotment plot is a plot of 10 rods (equivalent to approx 250m²) and this is still the standard plot size across the country. This is the amount of land considered necessary for a family to grow sufficient produce and to practice proper, safe crop rotation. While a full size plot is perhaps too large for many of today’s plot holders, it is historically, and still, the optimum size for a properly functioning allotment plot.

In 2009, as a solution to relieve pressure from a perceived large waiting list BHCC decided to offer only half plots to new tenants and to halve every full plot that became available for rent and rent it to two people. However, a recent survey has shown that the number of people on the allotment waiting list is less than half that previously assumed; whilst current and forecast plot size demand broadly reflects the current spread available.

Given that continuing the policy of dividing plots is no longer necessary to reduce the size of the allotment waiting list to a manageable level, but would lead to an imbalance between demand and provision of plots, the allotment federation recommends that the council ceases its policy of only issuing half plots and maintains the current provision of half and full plots.

While certainly getting more people on the allotments, and also providing people with a plot size that many do want, the Brighton and Hove Allotment Federation believe that the ‘half plot only’ policy has also had adverse effects on the allotment service, adverse effects that are increasing as the policy continues despite having already reached its maximum beneficial effect. **See appendix 1.** We support a choice of plot size, but soon, if the current policy continues, the choice to garden a traditional full plot will be lost. There are now only around 800 full plots left in the city.

For some time, the Site Reps, (the volunteers who manage the lettings), have been telling us that when they are given the next 40 names on the waiting list, that they can only ever contact about a half of them. Due to this feedback from Site Reps that many people on the waiting list no longer wanted plots or have moved away, in October 2013, as part of the strategy process, a review was made of the waiting list. People on the list were asked to reconfirm that they still wanted an allotment. The number actually waiting for an allotment is much lower than previously thought, over 1000 less in fact.

**Allotment waiting list**

9th January 2012: **2020**9th January 2013: **1937**

9th November 2013: **842** (after waiting list review)

**Number of Allotment Plots in the City**

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Council stated total number of plots in 2008 as 2300. Breakdown by plot size figures for 2008 are our best estimate as the Council does not hold the historical data on plot size.. Breakdown figures for 2013 are correct.

These charts show an increase in the number of plots in the city from 2311 to 3111 without any actual extra land being allocated, due to the halving of plots as they become available to rent.

**Data from the plot holders and waiting list survey 2013**

**What size plot would you choose?**

Responses from the waiting list survey.

**Q15.** “If you could choose an allotment size, what size would you pick?”

**18%** said ‘full size’ plot

**55%** said ‘half plot’

**22%** said ‘a compact bed’. (For example 4m x 5m)

These figures give us a clear indication of how allotment land should be divided in order to fulfil future demand. Most people clearly would choose a half plot, but 18% would choose a full plot, showing a clear demand for maintaining a provision of ‘Full plots’.

In fact the percentage of people choosing full or half plots closely matches the provision as it stands at the moment. *See graph above for 2013*

It is interesting that 22% would prefer a ‘compact bed’ of approx only 20 m². While this size of bed is not really an allotment as such, if people were to be offered a bed this size then the 22% (182 people) wanting this option could fit on approximately the area of only 20 full plots, again reducing the pressure for land significantly. This would bring the true number of people waiting for full and half plots down to only 646 people.

**Is your plot size big enough for your needs?**

**851** plot holders completed the survey and that represents 30% of all plot holders.

**Q10. “**How would you rate the amount of land you have for your current needs?”

**Q11. “**Do you expect your needs to change over the next 5 years?”

Most people **(75.7%)** with ‘half plots’ felt their plot size was ‘about right’, however; **22.2%** of people with ‘half plots’ felt their plots were ‘too small’ **38%** of people with ‘half plots’ said they were likely to want a bigger space with the next 5 years.

There was a marked difference with those who have a full plot.

**93.6%** of people with ‘full plots’ felt their plots were ‘about right’. Only **4.4%** of people with ‘full plots’ felt their plots were ‘too small’

Disregarding plot size:

**82.4% of people were happy with the size of their** **plots**

It therefore looks like the present balance between numbers of full plots and half plots is about right. However, if plot halving were to continue, this figure would inevitably fall.

**Should there be a choice of plot size?**

**Q27.** “A key issue for the strategy is plot sizes. Since 2009 it has been the policy of the Council to only let 125m2 plots (half plots). One suggestion for the strategy is that there should be a choice of plot sizes.”

In response to the question ‘should current plot holders have the opportunity to change plot size?’
**683** people replied. **91% of people either agreed or strongly agreed.**

In response to the question ‘should people joining the waiting list have a choice of plot size?’
**691** people replied. **75% of people either agreed or strongly agreed.**

**Conclusions**

Combining the **18%** of people on the waiting list who want a full plot, and the future wishes of the **38%** of people who have half plots but may want a larger plot in the next 5 years, we think it is reasonable to suggest that the provision of full plots should be at around **25%** of the total number of plots. The current provision in 2013 therefore broadly matches the perceived current and future demand for full size plots.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **2013** |  |  |
| current figures |  |  |
| **plot size in square meters** | **number of plots** | **percentage** |
| under 100m² | 190 | 6.11% |
| 101 to 124m² | 202 | 6.49% |
| 125m² HALF PLOTS | 1605 | 51.59% |
| 126m² to 199m² | 131 | 4.21% |
| 200m² | 107 | 3.44% |
| 201m² to 249m² | 35 | 1.13% |
| 250m² FULL PLOTS | 829 | 26.65% |
| over 250m² | 12 | 0.39% |
|  | **3111** |  |

**The current balance of full plots and half plots in the City closely reflects the expressed requirements of both plot holders and those on the waiting list who participated in the Allotment Strategy Survey.**

However, if the current policy of plot halving was to continue, the proportion of half to full plots would rise and the allotment service would no longer be able to meet the wishes of its allotment community.

**Based on the evidence gathered we strongly recommend that the halving of full plots stops and that the current provision is maintained. We recommend that the percentage of full plots should not fall below 25% of plots.**

**In Summary**

The Brighton and Hove Allotment Federation recommends that the current policy of halving all plots that become available for rent is stopped, and that the current allocation of plot sizes be maintained as it currently is.

**Half plots: 50%**

**Full plots: 25%**

**Other sizes: 25%**

We recommend that new tenants should have a choice as to the size of plot they wish to take. Those opting for full plots will only be around 1 in 5 of applicants. They should be well informed prior to choosing a plot size as to the expected hours and work they would need to put in to properly maintain a full plot. The letting of full plots and half plots should continue to be managed by the Site Reps and the Council. We recommend those current plot holders on half plots who wish to do so, should also be allowed to either take a full plot or match and swap plots with other tenants on their site, in order to either up or downsize their plot size.

How to provide ‘compact beds’ of 4m x 5m to the 22% that would choose them needs exploring. If extra facilities were provided, (for example a shared shed) then a higher rent, pro rata, could be charged to cover the increased administration and even increase revenue. If the Council were reluctant to take on this extra administration then Allotment Associations and Community projects could be encouraged to manage and allocate the provision of ‘compact beds’ of 4m x 5m for those who want them.

**Appendix 1**

Adverse effects of allowing only a half plot per tenant, and issues we will encounter more profoundly if the plot chopping policy continues.

1. **Crop Rotation.** The traditional and safe way of gardening on an allotment will cease. On half plots there is no room for proper crop rotation, for organic gardening, for compost heaps, or for leaving ground fallow for regeneration, all of which were very important in reducing pests and diseases and maintaining the bio diversity found on allotments. Intensifying the allotments may lead to intensive methods of gardening.
2. **Intensification.** If this policy is continued to its ultimate conclusion, eventually all plots will be chopped in half. Doubling the number of plots means the inevitable doubling of the number sheds, doubling the number of paths, (thus actually losing growing land) doubling the amount of rubbish, doubling the ‘leisure’ areas etc.  It also doubles the pressure on amenities like water taps, haulage ways, etc. Some plots are now very thin, this will inevitably lead to more disputes over borders etc, and more problems for the allotments officer to deal with.
3. **Administration.** The allotment officer and the allotment administrator’s workload increases each time a plot is halved and rented to two people. The number of plots let and the administration thereof is already up by 35% since 2009. The ‘half plot only’ policy will eventually double the administrative work for the Council, the allotment officer and the Volunteer Site Reps all for the same revenue.
4. **Fairness.** Traditional Allotment Gardeners who may be retired, part time or unemployed, and have more time are being denied a full plot in order to supply half plots to tenants who perhaps have less time and cannot cope with a full plot. So keen and good gardeners are being disadvantaged. Offering half plots as standard possibly encourages those with less time or commitment. This releases latent demand that was previously suppressed by the inability of many people to cope with a full plot. While we do not object to people only taking a half plot we do not believe it should be at the expense of more traditional plot holders.

It should also be noted that Site Reps are still entitled to a Full Plot. A certain amount of ‘plot jealousy’ is erupting on sites between those restricted to a half plot, who want more, and those who have historic full plots. This is not helping in regards to maintaining healthy site communities.
5. **Balance.** It should also be noted that the present policy of halving plots was bought in to alleviate the pressure of a very large waiting list. However in the 1990’s when allotments were not in demand, the Council had a policy of allowing people to rent up to 4 Full size plots, (to ensure allotments were kept in use and generating revenue). However if the current popularity trends were to change and allotments fell ‘out of fashion’ this would lead to numerous vacant half plots falling into disuse. Trying to rent lots of separate half plots to the remaining people would be very problematic. We believe this is another reason why maintaining a provision of Full plots is sensible.