

## **Norwich city council allotment report 2015**

### **Introduction**

This has seen some key pieces of work approaching completion. You will now be aware of the finished rule review; however we have also changed how we inspect plots, with the advisory letter taking a more prominent role in how we communicate with tenants over plot issues. The out of city policy is now live and we hope this will give a boost to waiting lists. We are also close to having electronic mobile working for inspections. This will offer the potential for increasing the efficiency and accuracy of inspections.

### **Progress on the out of city policy**

The out of city policy is now live and applicants who live outside of the city are now applying on line for an allotment. We expect an influx of both city and out of city applicants in readiness for the autumn letting period.

### **Marketing allotments and building the waiting list**

Further work has recently been put into marketing allotments to potential new tenants within the city. The allotment officer has been attending horticultural events within the city and we have created leaflets and posters which we are using to advertise the short lists.

More recently we have sent letters to NHS surgery managers within the city asking them to pass information on to their GP's on the short lists and asking that they consider advising patients that an allotment might be a good way of improving personal fitness and general well-being.

We have also provided A5 posters on allotments and how to join the list to put up in surgery waiting rooms. We will be looking to post similar fliers in community spaces.

### **Update on the rule review**

The rule review was posted to all earlier this year and the feed-back we have had from plot holders has been positive. The additional information provided in the guidance notes has been appreciated and the breakdown on our responses to all the points raised in the consultation has been commented on positively.

The new rules seem to have had a positive impact on allotment cultivation and also on waste management and we are now rolling out of new paper work and guidance that are associated with having new rules. This means new inspection guidance notes, revised 'get growing' leaflets for new tenants, new notice letters and new advice on the web pages.

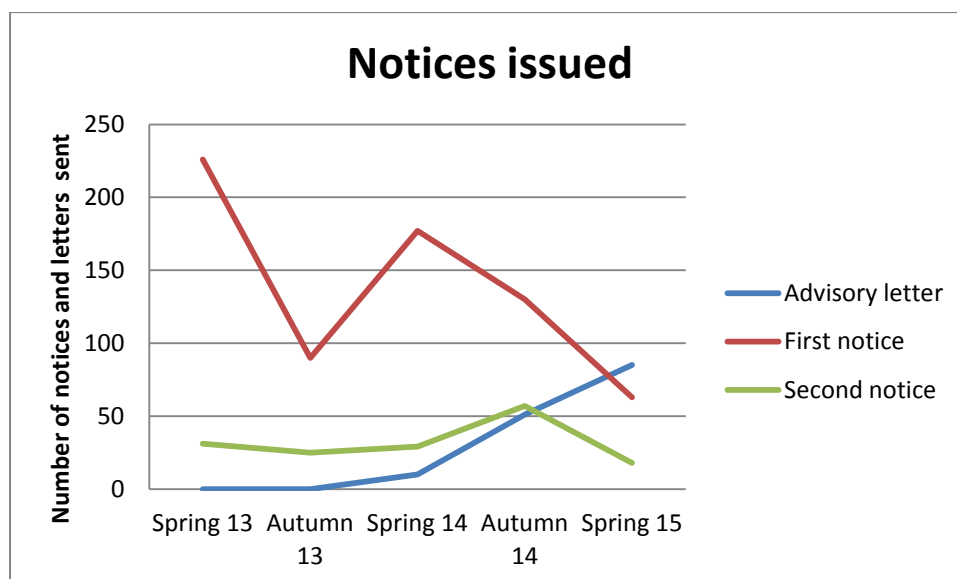
## Allotment inspections

The spring inspections have been compressed into a far shorter 4 week period this year. You can see from the graph below that this year's spring inspections have seen a marked drop in the number of notices issued. This could be due to a number of reasons:

1. As we are inspecting over a shorter period we will be less likely to pick up plots with a lack of crops or excessive active weed growth in May.
2. The increased use of advisory letters may be reducing the numbers of tenants put on notice although where possible we have tried to avoid replacing failure notices with advisories.
3. The impact of the recent rule review has been acknowledged by tenants and responded to with increased allotment activity.

This spring we have been using our new advisory letters and we will be monitoring the effectiveness of the advisory letters to see how well they have been responded to by tenants. If issues raised in the advisory letter are addressed and plots are improved without the need for an official notice then the letters have been successful. However if advisory letters are not being responded to and more often than not an advisory letter is simply delaying our sending an official notice, then the use of advisory letters will need to be reconsidered.

	Spring 13	Autumn 13	Spring 14	Autumn 14	Spring 15
<b>Advisory letter</b>	0	0	10	51	85
<b>First notice</b>	226	90	177	130	63
<b>Second notice</b>	31	25	29	57	18



## **Mobile working and efficiency savings**

The council will soon be introducing mobile working for allotment inspections. The advantages of mobile working are many – not only will mobile working greatly reduce on the amount of time spent processing inspections in the office, but it will also allow the inspecting officer to look up important information on a plot or tenant when they are on site.

Most of the work required to undertake mobile inspections has now been completed and we are looking at trialling our inspection software on PDA's this autumn. There may be some minor issues when we introduce this new way of working but we will be working hard to keep this to a minimum.

## **Increased information for allotment tenants**

There is a range of new material that will be going onto the web pages over the coming months that will help advise tenants on allotment issues.

Most of this information will be in the form of FAQ's on allotment issues which will be available on the web pages, but we have also updated the inspection information sheets and are creating new 'get growing' leaflets that we send to new tenants.

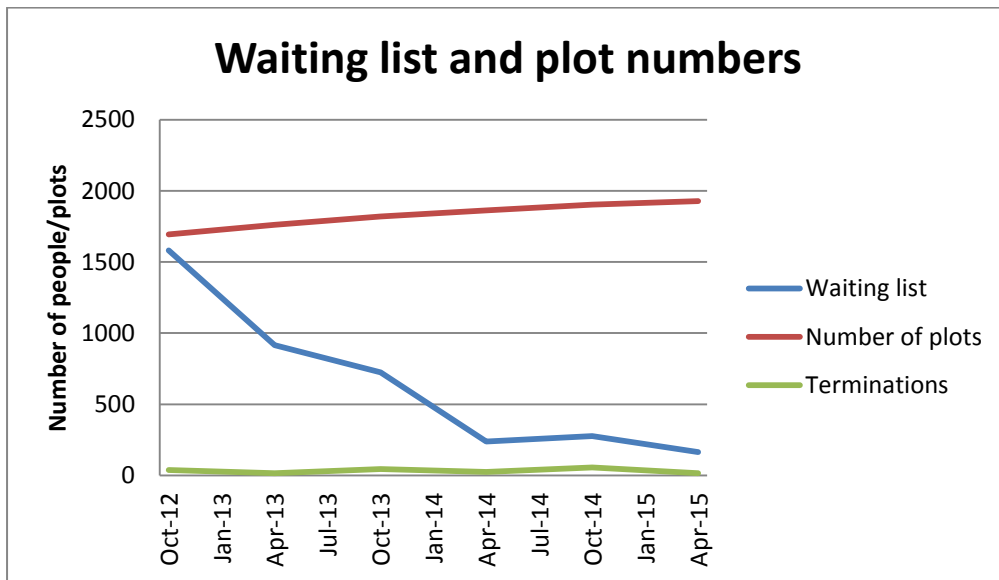
This year the annual allotment newsletter will also be accompanied by our first allotment questionnaire which can be filled in on-line or will be mailed out to tenants on request. The questionnaire will provide the council with useful information on plot holders opinions of the service and also a greater understanding of issues that you feel are important.

## **The waiting list situation in relation to plot numbers**

Despite the waiting list stabilising fluctuating at between 150 – 250 applicants over the last 12 months the waiting list continues to be an issue of concern and we are looking at new ways of encouraging applicants to join the waiting list.

You can see from the graph below that the number of plots available to let to new tenants has gradually risen while the waiting list has fallen. In Autumn 2012 it became clear that the waiting list had become clogged with applicants, many of whom no longer wanted an allotment or were appearing on many lists and thus inflating the lists. As a result we changed the policy so applicants could only apply for one waiting list and also a major review was done in March 2013.

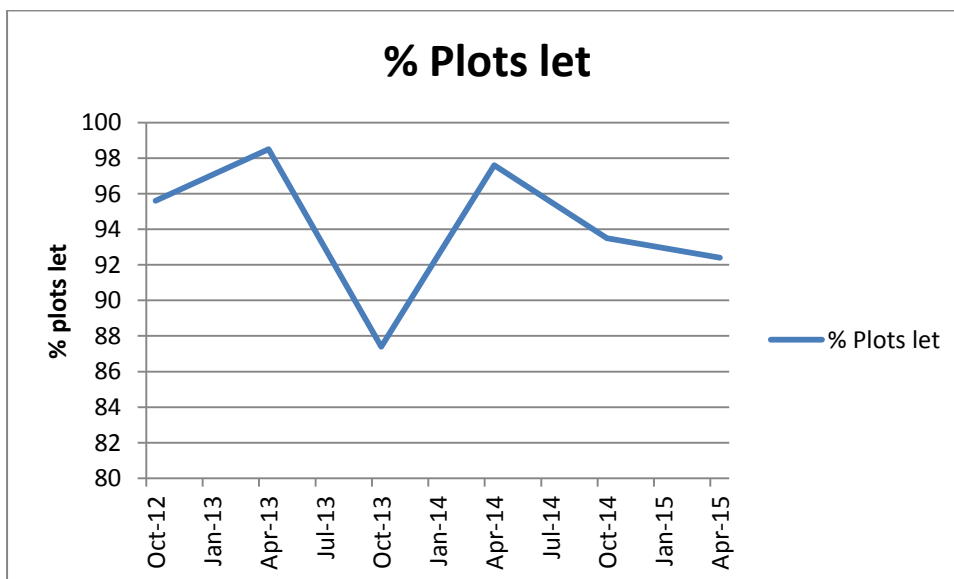
	Oct-12	Apr-13	Oct-13	Apr-14	Oct-14	Apr-15
Waiting list	1581	916	725	238	276	163
No plots	1693	1761	1819	1863	1904	1927



This waiting list review halved the list from 1581 to 725 in October 2013. A second major drop in the list occurred between October 2013 and April 2014.

#### Plot letting and the waiting list

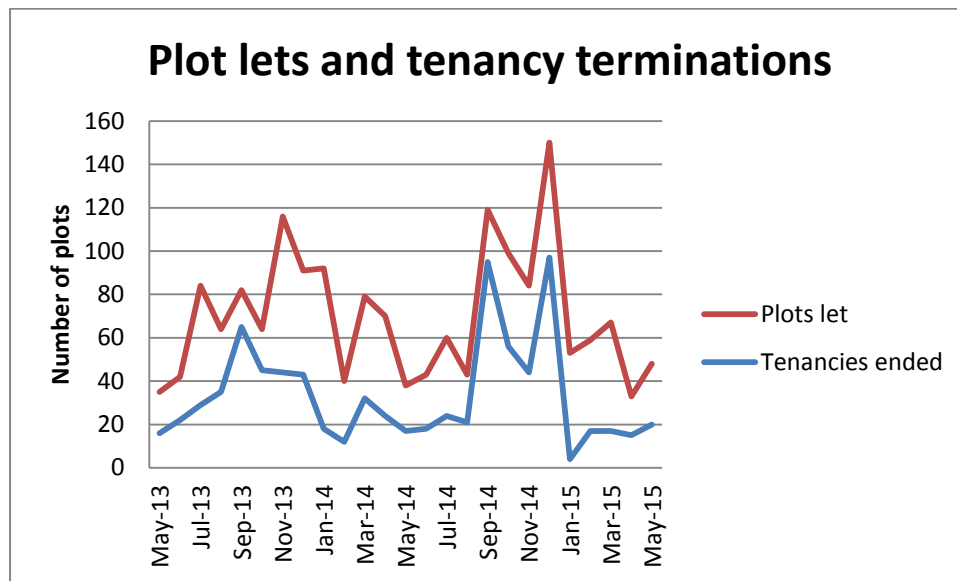
You can see from the graph below that there was a sharp drop in the percentage of unlet plots in autumn 2013, this was due to tenants returning a large number of plots to the council after the 2013 invoices. The splitting and letting of these new plots generated in autumn 2013 provided new opportunities for those on the waiting list to take up allotment gardening. You can see the drop in the waiting list from around 725 in October 2013 to 238 in April 2014.



At present the waiting list fluctuates at around 150 to 250 when in reality a total list of around 500, or one applicant for every four plots, would be considered a better balance.

## Plot letting in relationship to tenancy terminations

You can see from the graph below that the impact of the plot splitting policy is resulting in increased levels of plot letting as the majority of returned plots are split into two new plots. This is gradually having the effect of increasing allotment access while also decreasing the allotment waiting lists.



The graph also shows clear spikes in the number of ended tenancies which are clustering around the invoice period – this is because the majority of tenants tend to return plots to the council after they receive their invoice. You can see a second spike which comes around 2 months after the invoices are issued and these are tenants who have failed to renew their tenancy by not paying their allotment rent. This year we will be encouraging tenants to surrender plots before invoicing occurs, this way we can avoid some of the administrative cost of chasing invoices and also hopefully let surrendered plots sooner.

You can see from the graph above that although the majority of our plots are let in the autumn, we have a second push to let available plots in spring when allotment demand increases. In future we would like to increase spring plot letting so that we can reduce spring vacancy numbers and also get tenants onto plots at the beginning of the growing year. However at present the short waiting lists are reducing our ability to let plots in the spring and this is resulting in our continuing to let vacant plots well into the summer.