



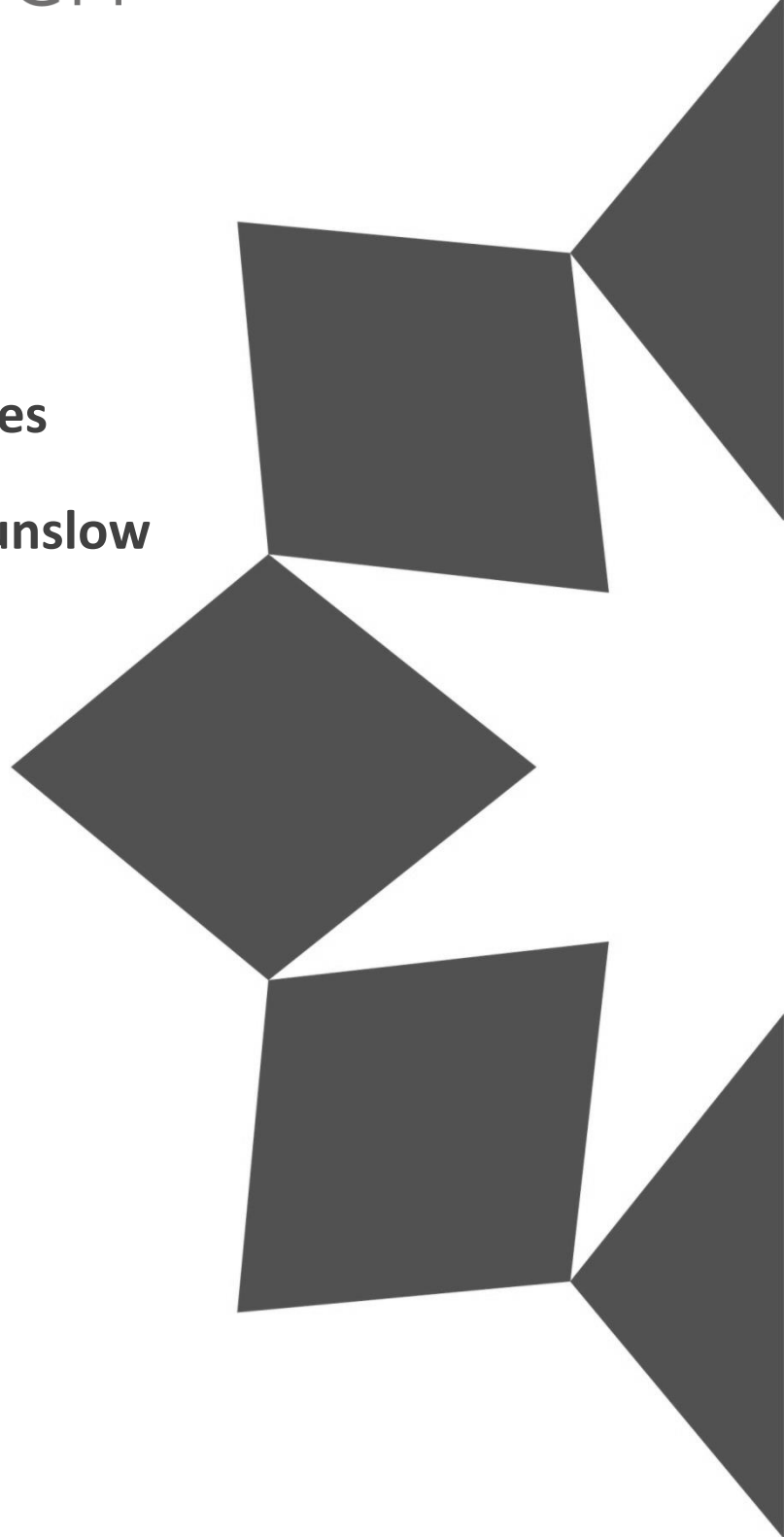
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research

**Feedback on proposed  
charges to allotment fees**

**London Borough of Hounslow**

**Final report**

**May 2021**



# Introduction

During 2020 the London Borough of Hounslow carried out an extensive consultation on the future allotment strategy, receiving feedback through a seminar, interviews, focus groups and surveys.

The Strategy is ambitious and aims to improve facilities and invest in the service with a number of interventions that hopefully will also improve accessibility and users' experience of allotments. The consultation results showed that the Strategy had overwhelming support, with over 91% of respondents agreeing with the vision, consensus that the Council and GS360 had limited resources and that an increase of the fees and charges would be one way to help to implement the planned improvements.

A review of the fees and charges involved a comparison with other London boroughs, as shown below. These are fees and charges for a 10-rod/250m<sup>2</sup> plot in 2019-20 (where available).

	Residents		Non-residents	
	Standard	Concession	Standard	Concession
<b>Barking &amp; Dagenham</b>	About £30 - £50			
<b>Bexley</b>	£95.00	£47.50	£115.00	£57.50
<b>Brent</b>	£184.00	50% up to 5 poles	£224.00	n/a
<b>Bromley</b>	£30.00			
<b>Croydon</b>	£58.50	£29.25		
<b>Enfield</b>	£140.00	£105.00	£206.00	£154.50
<b>Greenwich</b>	£200.00	£100.00	£410.00	£200.00
<b>Hackney</b>	£31.00	£15.50		
<b>Haringey</b>	£70.56			
<b>Harrow</b>	£55.50	£27.50		
<b>Hillingdon</b>	£66.62			
<b>Hounslow</b>	£71.00	£35.50	£71.00	No discount
<b>Islington</b>	£292.00	£146.00		
<b>Lewisham</b>	About £96			
<b>Merton</b>	£220.00	£155.00	Due to demand allotments are only open to residents	
<b>Newham</b>	£62.86 (min)			
<b>Redbridge</b>	£130.00	£63.80	£192.50	n/a
<b>Richmond upon Thames</b>	£189.00	£94.50	£380.00	n/a
<b>Sutton</b>	£82.50	£65.00		
<b>Waltham Forest</b>	£160.00	£70.00	£360.00	n/a
<b>Wandsworth</b>	£250.00	£200.00		

This identified that the London Borough of Hounslow had quite low charges and that for a number of years there has not been a review of the charges, leaving the service underfunded. The current structure of the charges is not easy to administer and leaves the service heavily subsidised with mean-tested water charges and no differentiation for allotment holders that live out of the borough.

The London Borough of Hounslow is therefore proposing a new fee structure to make the fees and charges more transparent and to support better managed allotments. The proposed new fees and charges structure is as follows:

- Abolition of a separate water fee
- An increase to an all-inclusive rental fee in line with average London charges which will be inclusive of water charges (proposed at £120 per year)
- The introduction of an out of borough allotment holder fee (proposed at £250 per year)
- A smaller increase for sites with no water provision such as Saxon Avenue and Manor Garden (proposed at £90 per year)
- Abolition of blanket concessionary fee for all over 65. Any concessions for over 65 will be based upon evidence that the allotment holder is receiving benefits including pension benefits
- Concessionary fee kept frozen (proposed at £36 per year) and inclusive of water charges.

The concessions proposed to be applicable to all tenants are:

- People receiving pension credits
- Disability allowance
- Job Seekers allowance
- Any other Council benefits.

To gain feedback about these proposed changes, the Council has allowed all allotment holders to email in their responses. This has allowed people to respond in any way they see fit and do so anonymously, without the constraints of a more formal survey.

The Council has commissioned M·E·L Research to code these responses and summarise them in this report. We have used themes to pull out the views of respondents, summarised below.

# Results

## Views overall

A total of 188 allotment holders and representations from four sites or groups – Chiswick Horticultural & Allotments Society, Sutton Lane Allotment Association, Waye Avenue Allotments and Chertsey Road – emailed their feedback on the proposed fee changes. Unlike a formal survey, email responses are much more free-flowing. However, from the responses, it's clear that 83% of respondents disagreed with the proposed changes, compared to 5% who expressly agreed. This isn't unexpected given the nature of the feedback. People were asked to comment on the proposals rather than asking for agreement or disagreement; this was already included in the survey last year.

	Count	%
Agree	10	5%
Disagree	156	83%

Here is a selection of comments is shown below:

*"This is such a huge hike in fees and I do not agree with it or think it is sustainable for many people. "*

*"But I urge you to remember that for a gardener/allotmenteer it is more than just a garden or digging space it is in our blood and being unable to afford a space is devastating. "*

*"I understand that you wish to increase rental fees in line with average London charges which seems reasonable as long we receive the same level of service and provisions as the average London allotments do. "*

## Improvements

Several respondents suggested improvements to allotments, in a similar way and following similar suggestions to the consultation last year. These are summarised below.

	Count	%
Improvement needed	49	26%
Safety issues/better security needed	15	8%
Better water	14	7%
Better waste/composting	12	6%
Toilets	11	6%
Oppose compost toilet	10	5%

Accessibility	5	3%
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A quarter (26%) of respondents stated that improvements to sites are needed. Specifically 8% agreed that safety issues and better security needs to be addressed. This was followed by 7% asking for better water facilities and 6% stated that better waste and composting sites should be made available, with a further 6% stating that toilets should be. In contrast, 5% opposed the proposal of a composting toilet.

A selection of comments is shown below:

*“The extra money raised for allotment rental should NOT go back to the allotments for £9,000 toilets.”*

*“As for composting toilets, we have all managed to get by without them for all these years. Surely any injection of funds from your good selves would be better spent on a collection of allotment waste for instance.”*

*“Over the last 2 years many of the allotment holders have contacted the council, the police and the allotment administrators to complain and request immediate action in regards to our plots being vandalised, robbed and generally the lack of security. Nothing to date has been done.”*

*“I would prefer a more accessible water supply and would be happy to pay some small annual charge to have taps rather than the system installed at present.”*

## Charges

	Count	%
Price rise is too high	134	71%
Live outside borough	89	47%
Fairer	39	21%
Abolition of pension concessionary	37	20%
Price increase should be done progressively	26	14%
Discounts	26	14%

Given the subject of the feedback, it’s unsurprising that a large proportion comments on the charges themselves. A total of 71% of respondents stated that the price rise was too high. This, no doubt, was a prime motivator for most allotment holders to feed back.

Just under half of the respondents (47%) live outside of the borough or thought that those out of borough should not have the extra increased fee proposed. A fifth (20%) of the respondents stated that they will be affected by the abolition of pension concessionary.

We also compared comments between those coded as 'live outside borough' and others, the feelings were similar. This suggests that the comments are reflective of both Hounslow allotment holders and those from outside the borough.

However, 21% of respondents believe the pricing should be fairer – which we detail more below – and 14% think the price rise should be done progressively, with 14% agreeing with the proposal to include discounts.

*“The need for improvements is understandable, but it can be scheduled over time in such a way, so it does not discriminate against out of borough allotment holders, making them the main source of funding of these improvements, which are going to be for the benefit for all allotment holders after all. This would be exploitative, unfair and unethical. And needs to be addressed. “*

*“Perhaps you will consider monthly direct debits for those who would prefer to spread the cost over a longer period”*

*“It is only appropriate to apply such high fees [to non-residents] to new tenants that are making informed decisions and know what they are signing for beforehand.”*

*“Surely there has to be some consideration for plot holders who have held their plots for 20 to 30 years and more, cultivated them and turned them into assets to both themselves and the environment.”*

*“In addition, a charge increase will likely become a financial struggle for those on low incomes and would be made manageable by the introduction of payment by monthly instalments.”*

*“The Council, together with Hounslow Voluntary Sector Support Service, have recently launched a Just Giving initiative as a way of encouraging the public's financial support for worthy causes; I believe supporting allotments is a worthy cause, too and if you're willing to try my suggestion, at least at first as a potential alternative, I'd be very happy to help to promote such a fundraising exercise both amongst our approx. 600 members and, indeed, amongst the wider Hounslow population by assisting the Council's communications team with a high-profile media campaign which has the potential to raise even more money than the proposed fee increase.”*

## Fairness

For those respondents who said that the price should be fairer, two-thirds said that it should be fairer for out of borough residents, followed by just under a third who would like concessions for pensioners. Suggestions included:

- It would be much fairer to impose the new fee on new applicants who are out of the borough and those who have been plot holders for 10 years or more could pay the newly proposed fee for plot holders from within the borough.
- Rethink the current planned increases and consider phased changes for all the proposals, including concessions and out of borough fees.
- Propose to increase the concession fee, including for pensioners, to at least half of the full fee – or as much as  $\frac{3}{4}$  - in line with the overall increase.
- Maybe it would fairer to offer older people a 50% reduction if they applied for it. Some pensioners struggle to make ends meet but don't claim benefits.

## The perceived effect of increased pricing

	Count	%
Affect health/mental wellbeing	80	43%
Others/I will have to give it up	53	28%
Will affect benefits	11	6%

Some respondents reported the perceived effect increased pricing would have on them. Some 43% said it would affect their health and wellbeing as a result of the proposed increase, while 28% would have to give up their allotment as they would no longer be able to afford them. Of course, this feedback was being provided during the Covid pandemic, which has emphasised the need and benefit of outdoor and green spaces. This may colour some responses.

*“It will be very disappointing if I have to give it up ... especially in these difficult times when it has been an absolute lifeline for keeping me fit and mentally healthy and is likely to do so for some time to come.”*

*“We all love our allotments, because it is our gym, our counselling session, our health food supplier and that of our families, friends and neighbours.”*

*“Will price out an elderly couple who have poured their heart and soul into their plot, who use it as their only form of exercise given physical disabilities and age, and for whom it has been their only source of comfort.”*

*“We would like you to note that in the absence of any social community centers in Cranford and Hounslow, these allotments are not only for growing environmentally friendly green produces, but they are also a social contact for so many isolated people, elderly and youth living in the area. They all so much rely on this social contact to suppress their isolation and limited social contact.”*

*“Maybe it would fairer to offer older people a 50% reduction if they applied for it. Some pensioners struggle to make ends meet but don't claim benefits.”*

*“Please show some compassion and reconsider your strategy, at least until this pandemic is over, then you can think again about your best way forward for the people who are relying on their allotment as a refuge and sanctuary away from the confinement of Lockdown.”*