

Review of the Allocation Policy for Allotments

Introduction

In the last few years there was a big increase in demand for allotments as lockdowns prompted a huge surge in interest in home-grown food. Not only was the allotment holder getting exercise, enjoying the fresh air, but they were also having the satisfaction of growing their own food in a sustainable manner. The increased demand for allotments required a review of the Council's current allocation and management of allotments policy as set out in the Fingal Allotments Strategy, published in March 2012.

This report will set out the context to the provision of allotments by Local Authorities, will provide an analysis of recent demand for a limited number of available plots and will set out recommendations as to how applications will be processed and waiting lists created from December 2022 until further notice. Timelines for the termination of agreements where plots are not being worked in accordance with the terms of the Licence Agreement, will also be more strictly enforced to maximise the availability of plots for letting.

Context

Allotments are small plots of land used to grow vegetables and flowers for personal use. They have a long history in Ireland and Europe as a means of providing additional garden space for horticulture and indeed respite from city living. Recessionary times have seen a resurgence in their popularity, and this may be due both to a back-to-basics public sentiment, as well as provision of low-cost food.

There are several key benefits in the provision of allotments and community gardens:

- Providing a social, community orientated activity.
- Providing physical activity to all age groups and different abilities.
- Providing locally grown food.
- Bringing vacant lands into active use.

Legislative Basis

There are two pieces of legislation related to the provision of allotments – the Acquisition of Land (Allotment) Act 1926 and the Planning and Development Acts 2000-2021. In the former, legislative power was given to Local Authorities to provide land for allotments subject to a defined demand for them. In this earlier legislation, an allotment is defined as: *"a piece of land containing not more than one quarter of a statute acre let or intended to be let for cultivation by an individual to produce vegetables mainly for consumption by himself and his family"*

In the Planning and Development Act 2010, *“allotment’ means an area of land comprising not more than 1,000 square metres let or available for letting to and cultivation by, one or more than one person who is a member of the local community and lives adjacent or near to the allotment, for the purpose of the production of vegetables or fruit mainly for consumption by the person or a member of his or her family”*

Review of Dublin Local Authorities

Of the four Dublin Local Authorities, the following is the situation in relation to their allotments: -

Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council manages 231 allotments at 2 sites: Goatstown 136 and Shankill 95. They have not accepted applications since 2020 as there is already an extensive waiting list. Plots are offered to DLR residents on a first come, first served basis, with a limit of one plot per person.

Dublin City Council have allotments at seven sites. Applicants are advised to email each individual site to go on a waiting list for a plot, should one become available. All plots are currently allocated, and it may be quite some time before any become available.

South Dublin County Council manages 425 plots at four locations. They have a few vacant plots at the Friarstown site and waiting lists are in place for the other sites. Only one application is accepted per household. The charge is €1 per sqm per year.

Fingal County Council has approximately 900 allotments at four sites: - Balbriggan, Skerries, Turvey in Donabate and Powerstown, Dublin 15. Priority is given every year to people renewing their allotments, and many plot-holders have retained the same plots for several years. Plots are in units of 50sqm, 100sqm and 200sqm. The charge is €1 per sqm per year plus €10 association fee per plot.

Review of Existing Fingal Plots 2021/2022

For applications received for the 2021 season, demand considerably exceeded supply as follows: -

Site	No. of Plots	Vacant Plots	Applications
Turvey	230	8	71
Skerries	250	5	40
Balbriggan	215	34	67
Powerstown	206	13	60
Total	901	60	238

An assessment was carried out in September/October 2021 to identify plots not being worked. Warning letters were issued to ascertain if the holder wished to continue with the lease. Many plot holders replied giving reasons for plots being neglected and committed to get working them again. Three people opted to give up their plots which were subsequently offered to the next applicants on the list.

A similar review was carried out in August 2022 of Balbriggan and Powerstown. Unworked plots were identified, and warning letters issued. During the pandemic a lot of plots remained unworked for quite a long time as plot holders dealt with restricted movement and ill health. The Committees have undertaken to arrange to get plots cleared which have been unworked for a few years, leading to additional plots becoming available for allocation.

Applications for the 2022 were as follows: -

Site	No. of Plots	Vacant Plots	Applications
Turvey	230	16	62
Skerries	250	7	37
Balbriggan	215	26	44
Powerstown	206	9	49
Total	901	58	192

While there was more than a 20% reduction in the number of applicants from 2021, there was still more than three applications for every available plot.

Current Allocation Procedure

Existing Plot Holders

In early December the Council writes to each current plot holder seeking confirmation if they wish to renew their allotment plot for the coming year. Those who wish to renew must complete the renewal forms, make the payment (including the €10 Allotment Association Fee), and return the completed forms along with proof of payment to the Operations Department before the deadline date. All plot holders must become members of the Allotments Association for their site. Existing Licensees are given first preference if they wish to relocate from one site to another and/or upgrade/downgrade the size of their allotment. It has been the practice in recent years that existing plot

holders who are slow to return their renewal forms are sent two reminders before a termination letter issues. It is proposed that under the new policy this will be just one reminder in advance of a Termination Notice to speed up the process of re-allocating the plot to a new applicant.

New applications

New applications are currently advertised on an annual basis. The period to apply for an allotment runs from 1st January to 31st January each year. The Council advertises for expressions of interest for vacant plots on social media and via the Council's website. Applicants are currently placed on a waiting list which is based *strictly* on the order in which the applications are received.

The Council currently allocates available plots on a first-come, first-served basis, with priority given to Fingal residents. If a plot becomes vacant during the year it is offered to the applicant next in line on the current year's waiting list.

The above process is currently repeated on an annual basis with applicants having to lodge an application every January.

Proposed Revisions (Effective 1st December 2022)

Following on from this assessment, the following changes are recommended.

- Plots will be allocated by means of a lottery draw to provide all new applicants with an equal chance of success.
- Unsuccessful applicants would then be drawn and numbered consecutively from the draw for placement on a waiting list. If a plot became vacant later in the year it will be allocated to the next person on this reserve list.
- An on-line application form will be made available as a fillable PDF posted on the Council's website which would facilitate existing or new applicants to apply electronically but hard copy applications/renewals will still be permitted.
- Only applications from person(s) normally residing in County Fingal will be considered.
- The practice of allowing current plot holders the option of applying for additional plots will be discontinued, considering the demand for new plots.
- Only one plot will be allocated per applicants' address due to the increased demand for allotments. Where necessary, proof of address may be requested.

- Only one reminder will issue in respect of plot renewals and a termination letter will follow within an appropriate period if all documentation has not been received by 20th January (process commences 1st December).
- Vacant plots will be advertised on social media and on the Council's Website on a bi-annual basis (no longer annually).

It is proposed that the reserve list will last for a minimum two-year period, with an option to extend for a further year if the ratio of available plots to numbers on the lists, remains low. The Council reserves the right to extend this two-year period by a further 12 months if the number on the waiting list exceeds the number of available plots by a ratio of 2:1.

Applications will be accepted based on choice of location (Turvey Donabate, Powerstown Blanchardstown, Skerries or Balbriggan) and for allotment size (5m x 10m, 10m x 10m or 20m x 10m) indicated on the application form and subsequent renewal notices by a first and second preference. The Council will try to provide the first preference plot size at the preferred location if vacant places become available.

Conclusion

The changes in procedures identified in this policy should facilitate a more efficient process for the management of the allotments schemes countywide. This includes stricter enforcement of the Terms of Licence for Allotments Lettings to maximise the number of available plots. New allocations will be carried out by way of Lottery going forward, to provide an equal chance of success to all applicants. Waiting lists will be valid for a minimum period of two years with the option to increase this to three years, depending on the availability of vacant plots. This will offer interested parties the assurance of remaining on a waiting list for a significantly longer period than the existing requirement to renew their application every 12 months.