

# About to lose the plot?



Catherine Clancy is campaigning against the rises

Allotment holders are up in arms as cash-strapped councils try to hike up rents, says Caroline Donald

**W**ally Newson has had a plot at Kidbrooke Park allotments, in Greenwich, southeast London, since 1982. "I was a lorry driver, but I got breathalysed twice and I thought, 'I've got to change this,'" he says. "So, instead of finishing work and going to the pub, I would come home and tend my plot."

Newson, 75, who runs the allotment shop, now looks after 1½ plots (a plot is 10 rods, equivalent to about 300 sq yards), on which he has five greenhouses and grows exotics such as chillies, peppers and melons, as well as traditional British vegetables.

Among his 70 or so fellow allotmenters are people of all nationalities and social backgrounds, but this may be about to change: "I reckon at least a quarter will go." The reason? It could soon cost them more to grow their own carrots than to buy them in Harrod's food hall.

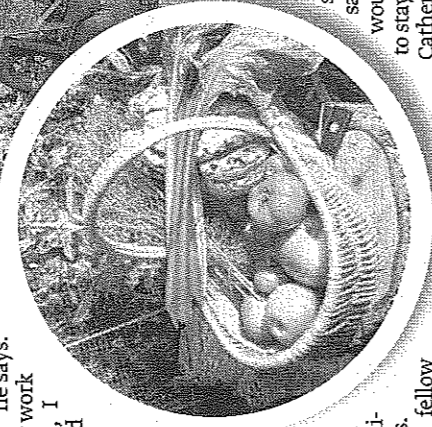
With government cuts of £42m and a deficit of £13m, Greenwich Council is looking to raise the annual rents at Kidbrooke Park by almost 200%, from £6.70 per rod for borough residents (pensioners such as Newson, and other concessionaries, pay half that) to £20 a rod for 2011-12, rising to £25 for 2013-14. For those not living in the borough, but within five miles of the site, the cost will be double.

Most plots in Britain cost £25-£70 a year, according to the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners, so that is some leap, with nonconcessionary Kidbrooke allotmenters facing annual bills of £200. Newson considers himself

lucky, as he has an army pension. "If I only had a state one," he says, "then I wouldn't be able to stay."

Catherine Clancy, a garden designer and the secretary of the Kidbrooke Park Allotment Association, is among those trying to convince the council that the money raised by the increase in fees will be small beer compared to the potential damage it will do to the community. "There's no real justification for the hike, it's a stupid thing to do; a lot of people are on very low incomes," she says. "We don't cost the council anything, as we collect the rents and manage the site ourselves."

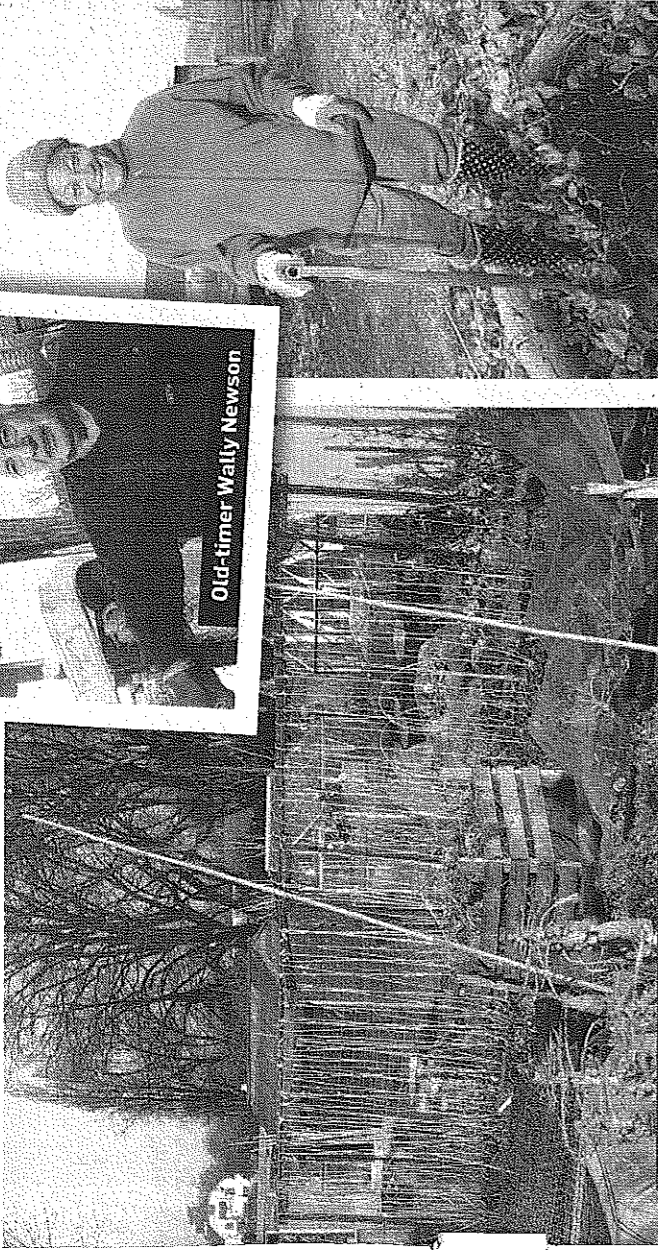
"We do appreciate that the rent has to go up, but it should be a more reasonable increase. Otherwise, you will end up with the allotment being a middle-class enclave." With more than 60 names on the waiting list at Kidbrooke Park, and lists at all the borough's other 17 sites, she is hoping that the council will release more land to be managed by allotment associations, which would keep costs down.



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Peter Terry

Old-timer Wally Newson

Kidbrooke Park, London, where allotment-holders such as Evie Hoyte, above right, are facing 200% rent rises

The plot-holders in Greenwich may be facing an unusually large rise, but there are many other examples of rents being hocked up way above the rate of inflation. These include Brent, in northwest London, where charges are rising from £66 to £150 for a full plot this month, an increase of 127%. In Greater Manchester, Tameside metropolitan borough council is raising rents from £43 a year to £100 by 2013. Allotmenters in Eastleigh, in Hampshire, and Chard, in Somerset are having to fork out 60% more.

It would seem that allotments are the victims of their own success: the National Trust now lets out plots, and the Landshare scheme, which matches landowners and growers, has more than 57,000 members. Growing your own has become seriously fashionable since the economy went pear-shaped in 2008. At garden centres, enticingly packaged baby vegetable plants now jostle with traditional bedding varieties for front-of-house billing. Many of us are worried about food miles and the unknown chemicals making their way into our meals from imported, plastic-packaged supermarket offerings, and there is a general mood of back-to-the-land austerity. A summer weekend now sees right-on middle-class families tending

their patches alongside immigrants growing favourites from back home and old boys in hand-knitted tank tops.

With their coffers empty, you can understand why councils are targeting them: for many of these new allotment-holders, £70, or £1.35 a week, the upper end of the national average, would hardly make a dent in their weekly Waitrose shopping bill.

Allotmenters are a peaceable tribe, but anyone who has admired their makeshift sheds and home-made compost bins knows they are thrifty, too — so, when it comes to such rises, they are

picking up their potato forks and marching to the town hall. Over in Barnet, north London, where there are 4,000 allotments on 46 sites, each with a waiting list, the holders are fighting against proposed imminent rent rises from £5.80 a rod (plus water) to £17, with rates for nonresidents set at £34.

At a council meeting last month, the public galleries were packed and, according to Richard King, secretary of the Barnet Federation of Allotment and Horticultural Societies: "There was an unprecedented number of people. It was quite a rowdy meeting."

## Turf wars

■ **Greenwich, London** Annual rent for a full plot (10 rods) to go up from £67 to £200 by 2014, a rise of 198%

■ **Tameside, Greater Manchester** Rent to rise from £43 to £80 in 2012, then £100 by 2013, up by 132%

■ **Brent, London** Rent to go up from £66 to £150 in 2011, a rise of 127%

■ **Chard, Somerset** Rent set to go up from £16 to £26, a rise of 62%

■ **Eastleigh, Hampshire** Rent to rise from £25 to £40, an increase of 60%

■ **Brighton** Rent due to rise from £22 to £32 for half a plot, up by 45%

■ **Gateshead** Rent rose in April 2010 from £19 to £24.50 for a 200 sq metre plot, a rise of 29%

Miffed that the council seems to be targeting a group that, by dint of being self-managed, is a shining example of David Cameron's big society, the allotment-holders of Barnet are protesting on two fronts. The first is that, as tenants, they need to be given 12 months' notice of changes to rent, rather than finding it out at short notice via the council website; the second concerns the scale of the rises. The association has won a victory on the former, as the council has agreed in principle to defer any increase in rents until April 2012, and it will agree the final amount on fees and charges on February 14.

The hope is that a court judgment from 1981, *Harwood v Reigate* and *Banstead*, will help them in their cause. Here, Reigate and Banstead borough council proposed to increase allotment rents threefold, but was challenged by a plot-holder, Mr Harwood. He cited the 1950 Allotment Act, which stated that a plot "shall be let at such rent as a tenant may reasonably be expected to pay for the land". The deputy judge hearing the case concluded that, as allotments were recreational facilities, the charge should change in a similar way to other amenities, such as bowling greens and swimming pools.

The case has been cited successfully in other boroughs. In November, the Hill Rise Allotment Association, in St Ives, Cambridgeshire, got rent rises reduced from 100% to 10% from October 2011, and in Bolton, allotment-holders have recently successfully fought for an increase of only 3%, rather than the proposed 80%.

These victories should give cheer to those locked in present battle. After all, as Clancy points out, it is not merely a supply of fresh fruit and vegetables that is at stake: "You get the food you want to eat, it is good exercise and you are out in the fresh air." There is also a sense of community, with people from all walks of life coming together.

"For some retired people, it is their whole life," she says. Exclude them by way of high rents and "you'll have people queuing up at doctors' surgeries". And who is going to pay for that?

Additional research by Cal Flynn.

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## WORMALDS WEEK

■ Half-hardy, summer-flowering annual bedding plants such as antirrhinums and lobelias need a long growing season and should be sown now. Scatter the seeds in trays or small pots filled with moist sowing compost, place in a heated propagator and leave to germinate on a well-lit windowsill.

■ Once the flower spikes of *Heliborus orientalis* emerge, use secateurs to remove the old leaves at ground level.

## Reader's question

My winter aconite flowers have been shredded. What did this?

B Reynolds, Truro

In very cold spells, the flowers are sometimes pecked and damaged by hungry birds. The best control measure is to place chicken-wire cages over the remaining plants and hold them in place with pegs knocked into the ground.

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## GARDEN CUTTINGS

### Test the waters

Waterperry Gardens, near Wheatley, in Oxfordshire, continues its open weekend today, 10am–4pm. 01844 339254, [waterperrygardens.co.uk](http://waterperrygardens.co.uk)

### Winter wonderland

The winter gardens at Cherubee, near Dolton, in Devon, are open today and next Sunday, 2pm–5pm. [rfgs.org.uk](http://rfgs.org.uk)

Caroline Donald

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