

## Fact Sheet

### Safe Sites

#### Tackling vandalism and other offences on allotment sites

Most of the time allotments are havens of peace in an otherwise busy world, where plottolders put in many hours of work for the sheer pleasure of growing food and being part of a growing tradition. From time to time though things may not go according to plan: petty vandalism, theft of crops or tools, fly-tipping, joy-riding, dog-fouling or menacing behaviour can all create a problem. Such blights – and the fear of them - can push an allotment site to dereliction faster than any developer.

“We need a 12 foot fence to keep the vandals out” is a common cry of allotment committees. Yet major fencing sometimes attracts intruders by presenting an irresistible challenge and implying there are valuables worth looting on the inside. High or untidy fences can give allotments a poor public image, can still be climbed over, and can prevent vigilant observation from outside the site.

Evidence shows that vandalism is rare on sites that have regular contact with people in the surrounding community. If local people know about the allotment site and it's wider benefits then they may help look after it.

A strong community on site is equally important. Plottolders get to know each other's movements and look out for each other's plots. A high level of activity and presence on a well-tenanted site deters intruders, and makes it easier to identify who is misusing the site and why.

**Please note:** Allotment associations will need to consult their allotment authority before adopting any of the measures suggested in this factsheet.



*Potato harvest. Kids do not always spell trouble!*

#### General vandalism and arson prevention

- Try to keep the site tidy. Having fewer places to hide will deter thieves and vandals. Kids are less likely to think they will get away with messing around. Fly-tippers usually tip where rubbish is already present.
- Do not leave material around that is easy to set on fire, e.g. piles of dry sticks, paraffin or gas bottles in sheds.
- Do not allow new or replacement glass greenhouses on site; use polycarbonate, rigid plastic or polytunnels.
- Fit a lockable box around standpipe taps or use push button-release taps to prevent taps being left on.



- Line polytunnels with chicken wire to prevent the skin being slashed
- Cultivate thorny climbers over sheds and fences.
- If you engage the media, do not let them turn your site into a disaster story. Publicising the vandalism/theft will put off potential ploholders, leaving plots vacant and ripe for further vandalism.
- More ploholders on site! Do not let the vandalism distract from your active promotion and publicity work.

## Working positively with young people

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Young people do not necessarily go to allotment sites to cause damage. They may be looking for somewhere to 'hang out', away from disapproving adult eyes and control. Vandalism usually occurs when young people are messing around, egging each other on to prove themselves to the group. Young children tend to throw stones, pull up crops and taunt. Older children may vandalise or set fire to sheds. Young adults may get involved in organised or opportunistic theft from sheds. Young people in general sometimes get blamed for site damage caused by other parties, e.g. ploholders with a grudge.

Ploholders sometimes react angrily to any young people on site, which can then provoke them to vandalism. Approaching young people with respect and familiarity is a powerful weapon against abuse; acting the disciplinarian is not. Today's young people are the ploholders of the future, so create a good impression that will encourage them to respect the site and come back when they feel ready for gardening.

Getting young people involved in allotment gardening gives them a sense of ownership rather than alienation, and sends out a strong message to their peers. This may sound naïve but it really is the most effective solution and worth every effort. Their 'streetwise' knowledge and local connections with other young people may even be useful for dealing with site crime. There is always an

underlying risk that young people lapse back into vandalism (or their friends come and do it) but it can be a risk worth taking.

Schools next to sites may be regarded negatively as a source of vandals. Instead, encourage the school or organisations for young people to take on a plot. Explain how an allotment would tie in with the national curriculum, healthy eating, crime reduction and citizenship.

See ARI factsheet *Plotting the future* for more information on involving young people on allotments.

## Young offenders

Developing an on-site partnership with your local Probation Service (see *Resources*) can help young offenders as part of their rehabilitation and be a source of free, managed labour for site infrastructure improvements. Get ploholders to come along and meet these youths - both sides might learn something useful. Hemplands Allotments in York used young offenders under the supervision of Probation Service staff to restore derelict plots and install fencing. "We were cautious about doing this and worried that crime might actually increase, but we decided it was better to try it than to do nothing. The young men worked very hard with full supervision from the probation staff. There weren't any problems and we now have a full site with good fencing," says Beryl Pallister, Chairperson.

## Plot Watch schemes

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Crime happens everywhere, not just on allotment sites. Working with other people and organisations affected by crime is more effective than struggling in isolation as your collective voice will be stronger.

First obtain some real evidence of crime or anti-social behaviour on site. This not only makes it easier to deal with crime, but it separates the facts from 'site myths' and gossip.

Encourage all ploholders to look out for suspicious behaviour. Set up a rota to ensure a good site presence during crime spates. Get local residents and passers-by

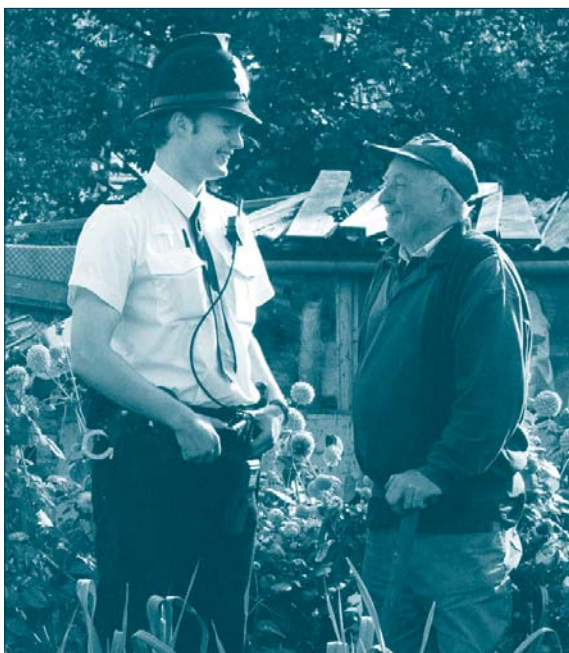
involved in keeping an eye on the site, perhaps rewarding them with free produce.

Put the local police telephone number on all noticeboards around the site. Emphasise that a call-out only occurs for serious cases. Calling 999 is for a real emergency only. Explain that the witness/victim should make the call and obtain a Police Incident Number, which must be passed on to a named committee member. Add the number of the nearest fire station if arson has occurred on site.

Join forces with other local allotment sites affected by similar problems. A partnership provides more resources for tackling crime and gives you a stronger voice when lobbying police, elected councillors or other agencies. Link up with others blighted by crime and your lobbying becomes even stronger, e.g. shopkeepers/ Chamber of Commerce, resident's associations, and housing associations/ private landlords. The ARI Mentor Network can assist with setting up local allotment federations (see *Resources*).

Ask your local Police Crime Prevention Officer to visit and suggest site-specific crime prevention measures. Build up a positive relationship with specific police officers working in your local community, e.g. crime prevention, community beat, youth affairs officer, community support officer. A regular patrol by the police or neighbourhood wardens can act as a deterrent. An allotment site in Bromley

*Build up a positive relationship with specific police officers working in your local community*



North Tyneside Council

gave a set of site keys to Police Community Support Officers who now walk through the site on a Friday evening.

Professional-looking signs made in a similar style to neighbourhood watch schemes to put on lampposts or fences can act as a deterrent by showing that crime will not go undetected. Signs can be controversial so do make sure that the majority of ploholders and your local neighbours support this.

### **Local crime prevention events**

Allotment associations in Leicester worked together with the police to hold a joint city-wide event about crime prevention on allotment sites. As well as Crime Prevention Officers, local plant nurseries gave practical advice about thorny planting, and fencing and security firms provided displays of products available.

On Teesside, allotment associations joined forces with the local fire service, commercial traders and voluntary groups to hold an event to tackle arson after a spate of attacks. The event led to the naming and arrest of several offenders, with Anti-Social Behaviour Orders being issued shortly thereafter.

Make sure you set up an 'Incident Log Book' to record all incidents of criminal and anti-social behaviour. Inform ploholders that if they do not actually report problems you cannot do anything about them. The log book identifies patterns of behaviour which can be used



to highlight the problem to the police and also schools, social services etc. Include the time of day, appearance of the perpetrators and details of the incident. Obtain a Police Incident Number for every incident reported; the police can then supply you with a Crime Number. Record all these numbers in the log book, so that you have a reliable record.

## Dealing with intruders

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An intruder is anyone on an allotment site who does not have permission to be there. Do not approach an intruder if you feel that it might put you at unnecessary risk. Instead observe any criminal activity carried out by the intruder from a safe distance, record it in your Incident Log Book and report it to the police.

If you do decide to approach an intruder, stay calm and reasonable. Never fall back on empty threats of violence or discipline. Do not use gardening tools in a threatening manner. The use of violence is a criminal offence, except for the use of reasonable force under *immediate* threat of violence.

Trespass itself is not usually an offence that can be prosecuted in the criminal courts. Tell the intruder instead that you will be reporting them to the police for 'breach of the peace'. This is the usual charge used and may be especially effective in deterring young people or people already known to the police.

If there are particular plotters who react badly to intruders, make them aware of the risky situation they are creating. All notifications to plotter(s) should always be in writing, no matter how trivial. Verbal warnings should never be used; they are unreliable evidence of good site management and may not be accepted as evidence in criminal proceedings.

## Theft

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Theft, like vandalism, is usually carried out by a small number of people and happens in spates, so act fast after the first incident occurs. Take these sensible measures so that the site is not an easy target for theft.

- Sheds are not designed for secure storage. Do not leave valuables in them. Consider leaving the shed unlocked to minimize damage.
- Conceal or hide tools, e.g. under the shed floor in a built-in 'secret compartment' or hidden around the plot. Alternate where tools are hidden.
- Deter thieves by making tools 'un-sellable'. Encourage plotters to etch or mark their postcode and house number on all tools; police may be able to etch or provide marker pens. Paint tools bright pink! A get-together to mark all tools on site can provide a morale-boosting event.
- If you do get a spate of thefts you may be able to trace the resale of stolen goods to a car boot sale or secondhand shop and then notify the police.
- If you must store valuable items in a shed, store them in a strong lockable box/cage or chain them to a metal ring fixed in concrete. Keep a note of serial numbers of power tools. Photograph valuable items.
- If you must lock your shed use non-return screws on all hinges, coach bolts or strong pad-bars, close-shackle padlocks or commercially available 'shed lock bars'. Bear in mind that, in the case of a wooden shed, the thief can just saw a hole or remove a window.
- If your site is a continual target, consider the removal of individual sheds as sites without sheds suffer less vandalism and theft. A steel shipping container can be used for communal tool storage and/or to house the trading hut. Local haulage companies may donate a shipping container. Check the condition before delivery as welding can be expensive. A container in good condition is difficult to break into. Containers are often cheaper to buy in winter.
- Never employ dangerous booby traps - they are illegal.
- For information about insurance issues see ARI *Health and Safety pack*.

## Fly-tipping

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A tidy site is the best prevention for fly tipping, as junk attracts more junk. Remove rubbish as soon as it appears, especially around the site entrance, highly visible spots or those accessible to vehicles.

Ask the local authority to supply signage stating the legislation and maximum statutory fine for fly-tipping. Put signs up outside and inside the site. In really serious cases, liaise with the local authority's Waste Management Officer and the Environment Agency. They have powers to carry out covert operations. Fly-tipping is illegal under the Environmental Protection Act (1990) and the Cleaner Communities and Environment Act (2005), with a maximum fine of £50,000 and imprisonment. Many local authorities also have an officer with specific responsibility for dealing with fly-tipping.

If regular tipping occurs, ask local residents and ploholders to photograph the offender, or log car registration numbers (EPA 1990 allows for a car owner to be prosecuted for fly-tipping even if they have loaned the vehicle to someone else). Record fly-tipping incidents in your site's Incident Log Book too.

### Pllotholders waste

Designated site rubbish areas may get out of control, due either to ploholders or fly-tippers. Encourage ploholders to think about how they will dispose of an item before they bring it on site, and discourage hoarding. Instruct ploholders to store rubbish neatly on their own plot until arrangements are made to clear it (include a statement to this effect in the tenancy agreement). Negotiate a more effective disposal system with the council or ask ploholders to take their rubbish home. If the council provides a skip fill it quickly and effectively, before the neighbours do.

## Other offences

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### Dogs

Dog fouling is often a problem for sites with a public right of way. Failure to clean up after a dog is a criminal offence under

the Dog Fouling of Land Act (1996). Ask the local authority to install dog bins and penalty notices. Failing that, provide a supply of plastic bags to encourage dog owners to take the waste home. Dog owners are more likely to do this in an area already free of dog faeces.

Make friends with the dogs - the owners are more likely to behave themselves. Give the dog a biscuit and you may even get the owner involved in your Plot Watch scheme!

As a final resort, a notice stating that offenders will be photographed and images passed to the police may nip the problem in the bud.

### Drug users and sex workers

These tend to use a site during the night and so are rarely seen. The same cannot be said of used needles, solvent bags or condoms. Log and report incidents to the police and local council, arrange a meeting with them both and a representative of your local Drug Action Team. The local council waste management officer can advise on removal of used needles. Some councils have a rapid response team for the removal of this type of litter.

## Problem ploholders

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Sometimes individuals rent a plot to use solely as a private rubbish tip, store business materials or stolen goods, or breed dogs. Some ploholders may cultivate their plot appropriately, but generally be 'difficult people' for the committee to instruct or other ploholders to garden alongside on a day to day basis.

### Eviction management

In genuine cases of inappropriate behaviour, and after the appropriate number of warnings and negotiation, speedy eviction may be the only solution, using the correct paperwork procedures.

If the site is directly managed by the local authority, the association (if there is one) may not have power to act. Instead bring all issues to the attention of the authority, in writing, even if they are slow or ineffective in such cases.

Associations with devolved management responsibilities should make sure that tenancy agreements and rules include clauses that cover 'anti-social behaviour', 'bringing the site into disrepute' and 'harming relations with the local community'. The association is then able to evict for almost anything that causes a serious problem. Also insert a clause about ensuring 'nil criminal activity' to cover the storing of stolen property, growing of cannabis etc. Power should not be abused. Define a serious problem accurately and obtain robust evidence. (See *Resources* for details of how to obtain sample management documents).

Example of a good eviction procedure (example: rubbish on plot)

- ✓ Issue a formal written warning with notice of a set time period to remove rubbish
- ✓ Final warning and set time period again
- ✓ Eviction notice with set time period to leave plot, remove property and return keys
- ✓ Copies of all letters/forms must be kept. It is worth using registered mail especially for the final eviction letter.

If this process is carried out then any further problems after eviction can be handed over to the police who are then dealing with an eviction problem, which is relatively straightforward. They can warn the person that they face arrest for 'breach of the peace' and take it from there. Again, all incidents/crimes should be reported and logged with the relevant police reference numbers.

### **Important note for sites under devolved management**

A devolved management association is acting as an agent for its allotment authority and is therefore responsible for keeping accurate records. Always keep site records in order and keep copies of everything. Do not use verbal warnings - always follow up verbal discussions with written confirmation. If a formal complaint is made to the allotment authority about your site management you need to be able to show you have thorough records

and are working within the remit of the lease. Additionally, the police are unable to act without records of an association's management process.

### **Keeping your cool**

Do not approach plottolders alone. They may display unprovoked offensive or threatening behaviour. When you do approach them, stay calm and listen to what (s)he has to say without interrupting or raising your voice. Do not rise to the bait if (s)he is aggravating; count to ten in your head instead. Never try to engage with a person who is drunk or on drugs. If a person has a mental health need or difficulty in expressing themselves, making contact via someone (s)he trusts may be the best option.

Engage the police only if strictly necessary as this could aggravate the problem. Before using the police tell the person that you intend to do so as this often nips the problem in the bud. Learn to live (and cope) with the eccentric behaviour of individuals if it is not threatening or offensive: they often just turn out to be interesting 'local characters'.

### **Points to consider when designing your perimeter boundary**

- What issues do you want to address? Prevent a spate of vandalism? Stop the neighbours extending their gardens? Improve the image of the site? The answer to this question will affect your choices.
- Observe your site carefully. Do all the problems stem from one part of the boundary, e.g. a part with pedestrian access, concealed from view or adjacent to a dark alleyway or a park? If your budget is limited, could you get away with a different type of boundary or cheaper/shorter fencing on the less abused boundary sides, maybe those with no public access due to a line of houses or in a more visible location?
- Do you have an accurate boundary map of the site? Check with allotment

# Comparison of different perimeter boundary options and example

## Thorn hedging

- The hardest boundary to scale once mature and one of the cheapest to install.
- Very attractive boundary and good for wildlife.
- May be breached at a weak point (gap) and not effective until full-grown. Can be used in conjunction with fencing; remove fencing later.
- Can require frequent cutting to prevent excessive height/breadth
- Usual choice is a mixed native hedgerow (best for wildlife) of hawthorn, blackthorn, dog rose. Hawthorn is effective after only 2-3 years and can be planted as a double row for extra security. Pyracantha is also popular.
- Hedge will grow more slowly if the situation is shady. Holly tolerates shade but is very slow growing.
- Do not use thorn species if boundary is exposed to salt spray during road gritting. Sea buckthorn is a salt tolerant species.
- If you want to use a tractor with flail to cut the hedge ensure that there is a wide enough access track running along the boundary. Otherwise invest in a hedge cutter, ladders and suitable training.
- Hedges can trap litter, which is then

difficult to remove.

- Bare root hedging is a very low cost way of planting a hedge, but is only available to buy and plant when dormant (November-March). To plant a double row hedge (staggered) you will need 5 to 7 plants per metre. This will cost about 30p per plant for one-year old bare root stock 40 to 60 cm high; which works out at approximately £2 per metre.

## 'DIY' hedging

- Brambles trained over chain link fencing or swathes of nettles around site boundaries are a good deterrent.
- Good for wildlife and cheap
- Invasive - requires high maintenance, can be unpredictable in growth and gives the site an air of dereliction if not maintained.
- Cost - free

## Palisade fencing (a metal, spiked fencing used by railways etc.)

- The choice for high site security but not completely invincible – on one site a whole section was dismantled and 2 sheds taken through the gap! It is also possible to climb over it.
- Rivet less, three-spike is best.
- Expensive but lasts a lifetime and low maintenance.
- Creates a 'Fort Knox' image;

services or planning to see the deeds map. They have no legal obligation to show you but may clarify the precise definition of any questionable boundary.

- Consult the neighbours; they may be prepared to share the cost if they share the site's problem of vandalism. On the other hand, they may not be happy if the small fence and nice view is replaced with 10 foot palisade. You may need to reassure adjoining householders that you are not encroaching on their boundaries.

- Have you obtained permission from your council and specialist input from the local planning authority, fencing companies, police or other experts? Generally you will not require planning consent if a fence is 1.8m high or less but check local planning regulations with the planning department.
- How much maintenance (medium and long-term) will the boundary require and can you afford the costs? All metal fencing will require annual inspection to



neighbours may not be impressed – slightly better if painted green or combined with a hedge.

- Ask for the back of the fencing to face the site, it is more effective this way
- Cost - £30-£60 per metre, depending on the height and finish. For example, a 2 metre high palisade fence with triple pointed heads, with a galvanised finish (uncoated) will cost about £30 per metre.

### 'DIY' fencing

- Generally scruffy and gets out of control
- Avoid any corrugated metal, suspected asbestos, scrap plywood
- Garage door companies may deliver old wooden garage doors to you, which make a strong DIY fence.
- Cost - free

### Barbed wire

- Not recommended because of numerous liability risks.
- Not permitted adjacent to public thoroughfare; check permitted legal heights with planning department.
- Razor rail (i.e. spikes) could be used on top of gates over 6ft high (this is not razor wire).
- Try anti-climb paint on top of gates

instead of barbed wire (similar to tar).

- Warning signage may be required.

### Mesh Fencing

- Less 'Fort Knox' than palisade and gives people a better view of the site, but not suitable for sites with serious vandalism.
- Cost for 2 metre high fencing including posts, fixing and galvanised wire finish, approximately £20 per metre.
- Chain-link fencing and weldmesh fencing are cheaper variations, costing around £10-12 per metre (1.8 metres high), including posts and lime wire threaded through for rigidity.

### Chestnut paling

- Easy to erect fencing but not suitable for sites with serious vandalism. Ideal for curvy fence lines and creates a highly visible site, with 4 inch spacing between pales.
- More effective in conjunction with thorny hedging.
- Requires replacement every 5 years.
- The cost will vary depending on the height of the fencing. For example, 6 foot high fencing with posts at every 2 metres costs around £7-8 per metre, while 4 foot high fencing costs around £4-5 per metre.

ensure that it is safe and in good condition. Investigate fencing carefully as there are many different models on the market.

- How much disruption will be caused during erection of the new boundary? Do you need to install a temporary barrier to protect your assets or increase your public liability insurance? Will your neighbours be happy with the disruption? Have you kept neighbours and plotters well informed in advance?



Volunteers lay a hedge at Welbeck Road, Derbyshire





*A hedge, once mature, is the most secure and attractive perimeter boundary – this privet hedge on a Coventry site is 100 years old.*

- Have you obtained at least 3 quotes from different contractors? The local authority may have a list of approved contractors or you may be able to use their contractors at a reduced rate. Have you seen examples of the materials they intend to use? Can you cut costs by helping with the installation or engaging a probation services scheme?
- See ARI *Health and Safety pack* for advice on insurance and conducting risk assessments. ARI Mentors can provide advice on perimeter boundaries. The *ARI Good Sites Guide* gives examples of regenerated allotment sites that host visits.

## The Gate

Often the 'Achilles heel' of an otherwise secure site: gates get left open, keys are left in the lock, evicted ploholders retain the key, or outsiders obtain copies of the key. A locked gate may prove more trouble than its worth. If you decide to proceed with one, the following precautions can help reduce these problems:

- Use a Registered Key System. Replacement keys can only be cut by a named locksmith at the request of a named person with the required paperwork.
- Mortice locks are better than padlocks.

- Ploholders should pay a substantial deposit for their keys, e.g. the City of York charge £30.
- The tenancy agreement or rules should include a 'key rules' section (sample management documents are available from ARI, see *Resources*).
- Ask the advice of a reputable local locksmith, e.g. the one your local council uses.

In Barnet a site installed a 'kissing gate', allowing public access to the site (so that local people could enjoy the allotments) but preventing the theft of strimmers and other large objects.

## Fundraising

Ask your local police, fire service or council what grants are available for crime and arson prevention, e.g. for signage, fencing, etching tools.

Applications that will deliver multiple benefits will stand a better chance of being successful, e.g. a wildlife hedgerow, added security for vulnerable individuals (children, elderly, special needs), or schemes to engage young offenders/potential vandals. Fencing can also sometimes be included in a bid for something else, as it protects the investment.

See ARI's information pack *A guide to fundraising for allotment associations*.



*Most of the time allotments are havens of peace in an otherwise busy world*

Our vision is to increase allotment uptake by individuals and groups

Contact ARI at:

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www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari

This fact sheet is also available in large print, braille or on audio tape from the ARI office

Please feel free to photocopy and circulate ARI publications

## Resources list

### Allotments Regeneration Initiative (ARI)

Supports and develops allotments regeneration and the creation of brand new allotment sites in the UK.

www.farmgarden.org.uk/ari  
ari@farmgarden.org.uk  
Tel. (0117) 963 1551

### Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG)

Supports, represents and promotes community-managed farms and gardens across the UK.

www.farmgarden.org.uk  
admin@farmgarden.org.uk  
Tel. (0117) 923 1800

### National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG)

The national representative body for the allotment movement in the UK.

www.nsalg.org.uk  
natsoc@nsalg.org.uk  
Tel. (01536) 266 576

### The Agroforestry Trust

Directory of 2000 useful hedging species. Suppliers of hedge and plant stock.

mail@agroforestry.co.uk  
www.agroforestry.co.uk  
Tel. (01803) 840 776

### Council for Voluntary Service (CVS)

Advice and support for community groups.

Tel. (0114) 278 6636  
nacvs@nacvs.org.uk  
www.nacvs.org.uk

### British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV)

Publications include fencing and hedging handbooks. Hedge laying courses.

Tel. (01302) 388 883  
information@btcv.org.uk  
www.btcv.org

### National Probation Service

www.probation.homeoffice.gov.uk

For your local contact in England and Wales go to website and look in section: about us/local probation areas

## Other useful websites

### www.growingschools.org.uk

Government programme to promote 'the outdoor classroom'.

**The following organisations can all provide support and information about working positively with young people:**

### www.catch-22.org.uk

See information on the community space challenge which helps young people stay away from crime and antisocial behaviour. Through this scheme young people transform areas, turning them into gardens, allotments, nature trails and playgrounds.

### vinspired.com

National youth volunteering programme Vinspired has replaced the millennium volunteers programme in England.

For information on millennium volunteers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland:

### www.vds.org.uk

Volunteer Development Scotland

### www.wcva.org.uk

Co-ordinating volunteer issues in Wales

### www.volunteering-ni.org

Volunteer Development Agency for Northern Ireland

### www.connexions.gov.uk

### www.princes-trust.org.uk

### www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/earlyyears/surestart

Look under the Department for Children, Schools and Families website for the Sure Start programme, which aims to deliver the best start in life for every child.