



Belfast City Council

Report to:	Parks and Leisure Committee
Subject:	Strategic Approach to Allotments and Community Gardens
Date:	16 September 2010
Reporting Officer:	Andrew Hassard, Director of Parks and Leisure
Contact Officers:	Stephen Walker, Principal Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager Caroline Wilson, Policy and Business Development Manager

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to outline a review and determine a strategic approach to the provision of allotments and community gardens within the Belfast Council area.

Relevant Background Information

1. Allotments

The Allotments Act (Northern Ireland) 1932 allows local authorities in Northern Ireland to *'if they think fit, provide allotments under and subject to the provisions of this Act for persons resident in the ... district of the local authority.'*

The Act outlines the provisions for the letting of allotments, the conditions applying to tenants of allotments and the duty of the local authority to make regulations around a number of things including the cultivation of allotments provided by them and for the preservation of good order in such allotments.

The current provision by Belfast City Council is as follows:

Site	No of full plots (full plot equivalents)	Waiting list
Annadale	88	134
Ballysillan	35	23
Belmont	38	124
Blythefield	12	3

As stated above, provision of allotments in Northern Ireland is discretionary. The National Society of Allotments and Leisure Gardeners suggest that there should be a minimum of 20 standard allotments per 1000 households. This would equate in Belfast to approximately 171 acres of land; currently we provide 11 acres for allotments.

2. Community Gardens

Community gardens are a relatively new and growing demand within Belfast. Community gardens are community-managed projects working with people, animals and plants. In practice, they range from tiny wildlife gardens to fruit and vegetable plots on housing estates, from community poly-tunnels to large city farms. The emphasis is as much about growing people and communities, as it is about growing plants.¹

Community gardens are often initiated to promote access to green space, to encourage community relationships and to build an awareness of gardening. Some projects provide food-growing activities, training courses, school visits, community allotments and community businesses. Most are run by a management committee of local people and some are run as partnerships with local authorities, whilst retaining strong local volunteer involvement.

They are considered to have several benefits which distinguish them from traditional allotments:

- **Social aspect** – the group of people who rent the garden (generally food-based) can be very diverse in terms of income, ethnic and community background and age. This promotes a sense of belonging and common purpose amongst a diverse group of people, including those who are newcomers into communities;
- **Health aspect** – the interaction in a community garden has a positive impact on mental well-being, as well as the traditional benefits of working outside;
- **Educational aspect** – the organised educational function of the community garden, enables people to learn from one another, often between generations, sharing knowledge on vegetables, flowers, animals and birds. This includes an increased awareness of sustainability issues, through re-using and composting;
- **Neighbourhood attractiveness** – there is a joint responsibility for the maintenance of the plot, allowing people to seek assistance from others in the upkeep of the site. This improves the overall tidiness and visual appearance of the site, aiding the overall attractiveness of a local neighbourhood.

In terms of the Council's current provision, the Committee has given approval to

community gardens at:

- several school projects in the west of the city;
- Waterworks;
- derelict land adjacent to Ballysillan allotments;
- Glenbank (Peace III);
- Glen Community Centre (Peace III); and
- Suffolk (Peace III).

In addition, a number of other sites have been identified as potential community gardens, including three within the Connswater Community Greenway and one at Grove.

Key Issues

At the present time, there has been a surge of interest in allotments, primarily as a result of increased environmental awareness and the current economic climate. As a consequence, more people are requesting an allotment plot.

As the demand for 'growing your own' increases, at the same time there is a limit to the availability of suitable land for allotments. Communal gardening potentially offers a way around this by maximising the number of people who can share one large plot rather than smaller individual plots.

Officers have been approached by a number of community groups in relation to sites for allotments and community gardens across the city; these include:

- Seaview allotments;
- Whiterock;
- Andersonstown Leisure Centre;
- Woodvale Park; and
- Musgrave Park.

The current position is that site layout plans have been prepared for four of the above sites. At two sites, additional survey work will be required to determine contamination issues and establish their suitability for food production. It is anticipated that further requests will emerge within neighbourhoods as the success of current community gardens expands.

Way forward

In light of the above issues, and in the context of the emerging Active Belfast and Open Spaces Strategy, it is proposed to review our current policy regarding the provision of allotments. A review would include:

- a review of the management model, including charges and tenancy agreements;
- potential provision of temporary allotments;
- plot size and standards of adequate provision;
- facilities including toilets, parking and storage;
- accessibility and security issues; and
- bio-diversity considerations.

As part of the review, it is also suggested that the Committee gives further consideration to the provision and management of community gardens. Given the substantial strategic fit with the Council's quality of life agenda, there may be merit in developing a 'community garden' model for Belfast.

Amongst others, the NI Housing Executive and the Public Health Agency have both expressed a preliminary interest to work in a partnership with the Council.

It is therefore proposed that a seminar is held towards the end of 2010, with a range of statutory and community partners. The purpose of the seminar would be:

1. To examine good practice in community garden provision and promote its benefits;
2. To establish an agreed approach to the provision of community gardens;
3. To identify opportunities for collaborative working, including the Peace III City of Neighbourhoods project (tbc).

The seminar will be for up to 50 persons including elected Members. It may be of benefit to invite some established practitioners from England to explain the challenges and opportunities of successful community gardens.

In advance of the outcome of the review, and in order to meet growing community demand, it is proposed that the Director is granted delegated authority to facilitate straight-forward requests from communities for in-kind support towards the establishment of a community garden. The Director will determine with officers the viability, deliverability and sustainability of the relevant community garden, in advance of any decision.

Any larger requests, such as asset transfer or leasing arrangements, will be brought to Committee for their consideration.

Resource Implications

Financial

There will be a small cost for the autumn seminar including travel expenses for speaker(s) from England. This is covered in revenue budgets and will not exceed £3,000.

In-kind costs for the establishment of new community gardens can be covered through revenue budgets.

Human Resources

Officer time.

Asset and Other Implications

n/a

Recommendations

That the Committee agrees to:

1. the review process as outlined above, including the organisation of the community gardens seminar; and
2. grant delegated authority to the Director to facilitate in-kind requests from communities for the establishment of a community garden.

Decision Tracking

A report outlining the findings and recommendations from the review will be presented to Committee by January 2011 by the Policy and Business Development Manager.

Key to Abbreviations

None.

Documents Attached

None.