

# Towards a Shared Community Gardens & Allotments Vision and Strategy for Belfast

Jointly hosted by Belfast City Council, the Public Health Agency and the Belfast Health Development Unit

## 1. Background

Community gardens and allotments are a relatively new and growing trend within Belfast. The development of allotments and community gardens are seen as a key resource for addressing the quality of life, and the health and well being and sustainability of the region.

Community gardens and allotments can provide a practical focus for environmental, health, economic and social development.

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.

The Council in partnership with the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the Belfast Health Development Unit (BH DU) is currently developing a shared community gardens and allotments programme, vision and strategy for Belfast.

## 2. Benefits of allotments and community gardens

There are several benefits associated with community gardens and allotments:

- **Health aspect** – they have a positive impact on mental well-being, as well as the traditional benefits of outdoor physical activity. There are also the nutritional benefits associated with access to fresh fruit and vegetables. Gardening has long been recognized as therapy in physical and mental health rehabilitation.
- **Social aspect** – the group of people who rent a community garden (generally food-based) can be very diverse in terms of income, ethnic and community background and age. Community gardens and allotments promote a sense of belonging and common purpose amongst a diverse group of people, including those who are newcomers into communities providing an opportunity for them to socialize and make friends. Community gardens also offer the potential to develop social economy enterprises among marginalised groups within the community.

- **Educational aspect** – the educational function of community gardens and allotments, 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. They also offer the potential to provide practical valuable case studies for primary and secondary schools and to contribute to the Eco-schools concept for teachers and children;
- **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.
- **Economic** – community gardens and allotments also offer the potential to provide options to alleviate food poverty in disadvantaged communities through the provision of affordable fresh, local and sustainable food.

The benefits outlined above directly support Government agendas in relation to health, education, climate change and social inclusion. There is clear strategic fit between these benefits and the organisational vision and objectives of both Belfast City Council, Public Health Agency and the Belfast Health Development Unit.

### 3. Programme Outline

The Council, PHA and the BHDU have developed a detailed community gardens and allotments programme proposal (See Appendix 1 for further details) in order to realise the vision for a shared community gardens and allotments strategy for Belfast. The programme will comprise of the following areas of activities detailed below:

#### a) Programme Reference Group

A programme reference group will be established to support the planning and implementation of the seminar and oversee the implementation of this programme and development of the Community Gardens and Allotments Model.

Members to include:

Belfast City Council representative(s)

Public Health Agency representative

Belfast Health Development Unit representative

Independent expert ( to be identified)

Northern Ireland Allotments and Community Garden Forum representative  
( to be identified)

**b) Community gardens and allotments seminar.**

A seminar will be held on the morning of Tuesday 22 March 2011. The purpose of the seminar will be to:

- Examine good practice in community allotments and garden provision and promoting their benefits as well as exploring the challenges;
- Outline an agreed approach (or model) to the provision of community gardens and allotments;
- Engage the community in identifying practical opportunities for collaborative working.

The outputs of the workshop will be:

- An agreed approach for the provision of community gardens and allotments in Belfast;
- A network of practitioners, including statutory, established to meet on a regular basis to share practice
- Contribute towards the development of the emerging Active Belfast and Open Spaces Strategy, led by Belfast City Council, and supported by the Public Health Agency and the Belfast Health Development Unit.

The seminar will be for up to 70 persons including elected Members. The invitation list will include representatives from the following organisations:

Belfast City Council  
Public Health Agency  
NI Housing Executive  
DSD  
DRD  
DE/local schools  
Groundwork NI  
GROW  
Conservation Volunteers NI  
Organic Centre  
NIEL  
Salvation Army  
NI Allotments Forum  
Area Partnership Board  
Healthy Living Centres  
Parks Friends Groups  
Voluntary/community sector orgs

A draft agenda is outlined below:

Community gardens and allotments seminar  
Tuesday 22 March 2011  
Venue: TBC

- 9.15am Registration (with tea and coffee)**
- 9.30am Welcome and Introduction**  
Dr Eddie Rooney, Chief Executive, Public Health Agency  
Peter McNaney, Chief Executive, Belfast City Council
- 9.50am Guest speaker**  
Getting your hands dirty: the challenges and opportunities of community gardening  
Pam Warhurst, Incredible Edible, Todmorden *or*  
Pam Smith, CAFE Space
- Question and answer session**
- 10.30am Case studies – existing practice in Northern Ireland**
- GROW, Waterworks, Belfast – community gardens or Divis Tower, Belfast – amenity horticulture section/ fruit and vegetable – Community Gardens
  - Carrickfergus council - Allotments
  - Musgrave Park – community gardens, allotments and therapy garden
- Question and answer session**
- 11.10am Tea/ coffee break**
- 11.20am Roundtable discussions - Community gardening in Belfast**  
Current practice – the challenges, opportunities and gaps
- Plenary session – Feedback**
- 11.50am Panel discussion**  
To include: statutory rep(s); community reps; GWNI; and guest speaker  
(& representative from Northern Ireland Allotments and Community Garden Forum)
- 12.20pm Roundtable discussions - A model for Belfast**  
What works; what needs improved; what fits where?
- Plenary session – Feedback**
- 12.50pm Next steps**  
Identifying opportunities for improvement and implementation
- 1.00pm Agreement for network meeting and close**
- Lunch**

### **c) Community Garden Demonstration Project**

To inform development of the community gardens and allotments model, it is proposed that one demonstration site, within the Belfast area is selected and supported to develop and enhance its existing service within the timescale of this programme ( before end March 2011). This demonstration site will explore and document;

- good practice in community engagement and ownership
- improving health and wellbeing
- longer term sustainability of community gardens and allotments

This demonstration site will be selected by Belfast City Council and will meet the following criteria:

- currently operational community garden/ allotment
- located within the Belfast City Council area
- have strong engagement and ownership by the local community
- be at a stage of development where existing services can be enhanced and developed within the programme timeframe ( end March 2011)

The lead organisation for the demonstration project will provide regular updates to the programme reference group and will provide an evaluation report to demonstrate the impact and outcomes of the enhanced service. This learning will be shared at the seminar.

### **d) Equipment for Schools Scheme**

Community Garden support packs will be provided to schools in the Belfast area. This element of the programme could be used to support existing Eco-schools or promoted to all schools in the Belfast area with a limited number of packs – provided on a first come basis. [Could this be supported through council/ Belfast Education & Library board?]

### **e) Community Consultation**

To develop a community allotments and garden model for Belfast and feed into the development of a shared strategy for Belfast it is proposed that a comprehensive community engagement exercise is undertaken during February and March 2011.

Alongside the community consultation, training and information sessions will take place across the city for community groups interested in finding out more about community gardens and allotments.

Feedback on this exercise will be presented at the seminar. This exercise will include:

- A baseline audit to establish the
  - ownership
  - locations
  - usage
  - stage of development
  - sustainability and
  - extent of health and wellbeing focusof existing community gardens and allotments across Belfast
  
- Focus groups with community and voluntary sector organisations across Belfast to;
  - establish current interest in developing community gardens and allotments across the city
  - Scope existing good practice in community garden/ allotments provision and related challenges
  - scope current community understanding of the health and wellbeing benefits of community gardens and allotments
  - scope locations and stages of development of new/ proposed community gardens and allotments
  
- Information and training sessions on community gardens and allotments

**4.0 Proposed programme costs allocated by PHA**

<b>Programme Elements</b>	<b>Details</b>	<b>Cost</b>
Seminar	50 persons @ £30 pp (inc. t/c/lunch/room hire) =£1,500 Speaker's expenses =£500 Invitations/ Promotional Materials/ Photography=£400	£2,400
Community Consultation & Training sessions	Voluntary sector organization/s to be engaged to undertake community consultation and training sessions	£10,000
Programme Promotional Materials	Posters, Flyers, Invitations, Leaflets	£600
Community Garden/ Allotment Demonstration Project	Demonstration site to be selected by BCC – proposal to be agreed	£12,000
Resources for school based garden/ allotment projects	Equipment costs	£10,000
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£35,000</b>

## **5.0 Next steps**

- Co-ordinate seminar ( date, programme, logistical arrangements and issue invitations)
- Publicity and promotional material for seminar and community consultation
- Selection of demonstration site (agree proposal)
- Engage organization/s to undertake community consultation
- Co-ordinate equipment scheme for local schools

## **6.0 Further information**

Emer Boyle, BCC Parks and Leisure Policy and Business Development Manager (9027 0329)

Colette Rogers, Health and Social Wellbeing Improvement Manager, Public Health Agency (9031 1611)

Jacki McBrinn, Belfast Health Development Unit Manager (028 9050 2073)