

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A review of Allotment Provision, Community Gardens and demand for 'Grow Your Own' initiatives within Belfast

This study has been undertaken by Sustainable Northern Ireland

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'GROW YOUR OWN'

This is an executive summary of a study reviewing the provision of allotments and community gardens in Belfast. The study undertook a review of current operational practise and identified options for increasing 'Grow your Own' opportunities within the Greater Belfast area.

The purpose of this study is to provide recommendations that can be used to inform the development of a 'Community Gardens and Allotments Strategy' for Belfast.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A summary of the main findings of the report and recommendations

Sustainable Northern Ireland has undertaken a baseline study of 'Grow your Own' provision within Belfast. This has involved mapping existing and potential provision of space for allotments and community gardens, reviewing 'Grow your Own' models and management practices, and consulting with key stakeholders involved in 'Grow your Own' initiatives. It has also involved gathering feedback from residents of Belfast who are not currently involved in a 'Grow your Own' scheme.

The purpose of this study and report is to enable Belfast City Council to amend current operational practices and to apply the findings and recommendations of this study to the development of a '**Community Gardens and Allotments Strategy**' for Belfast.

The Objective of a 'Community Gardens and Allotment Strategy' for Belfast

Considerable research exists on the wider benefits of 'Grow your Own' initiatives. In addition to the positive effect gardening is shown to have on health and well-being, it can address community and social issues, biodiversity and green space, employment and skills development as well as food security and sustainability. Belfast City Council's '**Community Gardens and Allotment Strategy**' should be developed so that its potential application is not confined to one council department. The concept of 'Grow your Own', and the provision of facilities, should be considered as a resource by all council departments for example: economic development; waste management; community development and leisure can all use grow facilities within their own departmental objectives and functions. The Strategy should be used to demonstrate how Health Equity in All Policy (HEiAP) works in practice by using it to help align the Strategy with Belfast City Council's wider remit to improve the quality of life for all its citizens.

Consideration of Allotments for 'Grow your Own'

There is no standard size for allotments but those run by Belfast City Council tend to be larger and less expensive than most others in Northern Ireland. Council run allotments should be standardized for size (large approx. 160m², medium 80m² and small 40m²) and this model should be applied across all existing allotments sites when plots become available. A pricing structure should reflect the new model (£50 large, £40 medium and £30 small) and the services provided by the Council. This should be reviewed every three years.

Allotment rules and regulations should be updated and communicated to all allotment users. A Memorandum of Understanding should be developed that sets out the specific role of the council in managing allotments (waste disposal, water supply, path maintenance etc.) as well as explicitly

stating what allotment holders are expected to do (weed control, aesthetics, general maintenance etc.). MoUs should be signed by all allotments holders and an Allotment Committee (one per allotment site) be used to assess, in conjunction with the council, if either party is failing to honour their commitments. While all allotments should have the same rules, regulations, sizing model, pricing structure, facilities and services provided, each site should be managed via a partnership agreement between Belfast City Council and the individual Allotment Committee.

Demand for allotments currently outweighs supply and research indicates that this is likely to increase. Belfast City Council should consider how this demand can be met. Waiting lists are long and turnover is minimal. A review of existing allotments shows that many are overgrown or are not being properly maintained (potentially 10-20% on each site). Vacant and unused plots/space is available on most allotment sites and should be upgraded to allotments standards.

Options to meet demand include finding additional land for 'Grow your Own' facilities, encouraging an increase in private facilities being made available (e.g. city farms, farm shares), making vacant statutory land available (DSD and NIHE), using sections of the city's public parks and investigating garden share options.

Consideration of Community Gardens for 'Grow your Own'

Community gardens in Belfast support at least 370 'community gardeners'; it is difficult to ascertain an exact number. Community gardening is growing in popularity and there are many example models of it in practice. In Belfast there are several types of community gardens: ones set up by the council; ones set up and managed by community organisations; and ones set up and managed by communities. Community gardens enable a large number of individuals to get involved in 'Grow your Own' initiatives, but careful consideration should be given to what Belfast City Council's role should be. Building the capacity within a community to enable them to take on the responsibility for a community garden can be a time consuming and complex activity. Providing the garden infrastructure is not sufficient; particularly for non-constituted community groups. Skills development, training and group management need to be a consideration when establishing new gardens. This is where working in partnership across council departments, and with external partners, may make the process more effective.

Council funded community gardens were set up using Peace III monies. This has now been spent and the gardens are up and running. The experiences and lessons learnt from this process should be used in the future planning of other community gardens. Ideally community development and capacity building is needed when gardens are established to take new growers through at least one full growing season. A physical resource where Council 'gardeners' are available to provide practical support to community gardens is necessary. It is important that these gardeners provide support for the community gardens, and are available to answer questions and give guidance, but that they do not fall into the role of maintaining or managing gardens. This is the role of the community.

It is important that the new '**Community Gardens and Allotments Strategy**' is reflective of the resources available to the Council for community gardens. There are several requests for new community gardens but resources are limited. Careful consideration is necessary to ensure equal distribution across the city. An allocation matrix should be used where potential sites are allocated points based on a number of set criteria.

Belfast City Council should develop a protocol for how it secures and then allocates funding and support to community gardens. Like allotments, a Memorandum of Understanding should be developed for each of the community gardens in Belfast that have been established using funding from the Council. This would include an explanation of the Council's role (e.g. removal of waste, provision of equipment, practical guidance, bulk purchasing - all with specific times/amounts) as well as what the council is not responsible for. A MoU will help manage expectation as well as ensuring an equal share of council resources between all gardens.

Community gardening has been highlighted as one of the options for people on waiting lists for allotments to participate in; possibly as a way of gaining gardening experience before taking on an allotment. Community gardens tend to be able to facilitate a larger number of people than allotments but for this to happen they need to be run where different communities can have access. They can also be used for school groups and to accommodate training initiatives.

Community gardens established in parks and other public areas could be used help to demonstrate the added value of 'Grow your Own' initiatives. Demonstration projects could be established and the 'Friends of...' groups for each of the parks could have an active role in their management.

Consideration of other options for 'Grow your Own'

A Community Gardens and Allotments Strategy should consider other options available to encourage all residents of Belfast to get involved, while at the same time recognising availability of resources (funding and people). Development of partnership is a logical solution; there are examples of this already happening e.g. Ballysillan Community Garden is managed by CVNI.

A mapping exercise has identified considerable amounts of land within Belfast City which could be made available for 'Grow your Own' initiatives. Pockets of vacant land exist on both statutory and private sites that could be leased for community gardens. An online database could be established to help landowners and those wanting to establish community gardens come together to develop community partnerships.

There is also potential to use derelict sites for temporary grow facilities or 'pop-up' gardens. Belfast City Council should consider pilot schemes using people on the allotment waiting list. It is important then when temporary sites are used that expectation is managed and that a timescale for the availability of the site be established from the outset.

Gardening at home (window box gardens) was not well received with any of the stakeholders interviewed. While Belfast City Council literature for community and allotment gardeners could include information on how to use small spaces for growing food, research suggests there is limited appeal (at the minute) and that potentially resources could be more effectively allocated. Those already involved in 'Grow your Own' initiatives feel that window box gardening would not be very satisfying and would be lonely, while those not currently engaged feel that they would rather have more direct support as well as other people to do it with. Belfast City Council should still provide information on the options for window box gardens as part of the **'Community Gardens and Allotments Strategy'**.

Stakeholder Engagement



Focus groups, surveys, the 'Growing Communities' Stakeholder Group, and one-on-one interviews were used to gather feedback on existing 'Grow your Own' provision and to test opinion on a number of solutions or options to change operational practices and to increase opportunities for people to get involved.

Allotment stakeholders value allotments above all other 'Grow your Own' options. There is consensus that better management of allotments sites is necessary with a more pro-active agreement between the Council and allotment users established. Waiting list management is an issue with many people waiting over three years for an allotment. More responsibility for day-to-day running of the sites could be handed over to allotment holders with minimal input by the Council; the exact nature of this would need to be agreed and communicated.

There are issues with some of the Council funded community gardens now that the funding has finished. Like allotments-holders community gardeners need to have a greater understanding of what the Council's role is and what they are responsible for themselves. Expectation needs to be better managed. Community gardens tend to run more effectively when they are part of an established community where existing structures can be used to arrange group buying of seeds, fertiliser, arranging hire of equipment and recruiting new volunteers.

The need for training was popular among allotments stakeholders, community gardeners and those not currently involved with either type of scheme. The '**Community Garden and Allotments Strategy**' should consider how people can get involved with short term 'grow your own' initiatives as some stakeholders not currently involved in any scheme said that having to make a long term commitment is a barrier.

Key Recommendations

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS - ALLOTMENTS

1. Agree a management protocol for all allotments and communicate it through all relevant managers and allotment holders.
2. Update allotment rules and management protocols in consultation with existing allotment committees.
3. Belfast City Council should develop a Memorandum of Understanding for each allotment setting out what its management role should be.
4. The MoU should include a list of responsibilities for allotments holders as well as the protocol for reallocating a site.
5. BCC adopt a management approach where there is a partnership between the Council and the community where enforcement of rules and regulations is a joint activity with decisions agreed by both parties.
6. BCC needs to agree an operational protocol with the allotments sites (the same for all sites) setting out who is responsible for operational issues such as waste removal, path management and general maintenance. This protocol needs to be available on site and each allotment holder issued with a copy. The protocol should be specific and measurable.
7. Agree a size and pricing model for all future allotment sites; consider £50pa for a large 160m² plot, £40pa for a medium 80m² plot and £30pa for a small 40m² plot.

8. BCC should apply proposed size, pricing and rules model to its new allotments at Musgrave, and then on other allotment sites when plots become available.
9. Survey all large plot holders over 160m² to see if they would want to subdivide their plots to increase the number available.
10. Review land use on existing allotments and allocate unused sections to people on the allotment waiting list.
11. The Council should have scheduled site inspections that are carried out with a member of each allotment management committee.
12. Before allotment plots are allocated to new users the Council should ensure they are in reasonable condition and that any significant areas of over growth are removed.
13. Waiting lists need to be better managed. Those on the waiting list should have to reconfirm annually that they wish to remain on this list.
14. Existing websites like landshare.net should be promoted to people currently on the allotments waiting list as alternative ways of enabling them to 'grow their own'.
15. Alternative options, such as community gardening, should be offered to those on the allotments waiting list

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS - COMMUNITY GARDENS

16. Agree a management protocol for community gardens and communicate it through all relevant managers and community gardeners.
17. Develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for each Community Garden that receives (has received) support (funding or in-kind) from the Council setting out what the Council's role is and what the responsibility of the community gardeners is. This should set out explicitly what the council does and how often and should be the same for each garden.
18. Use a matrix to assess where community gardens should be established to review their suitability, the capacity of the community group and the sustainability of the project.
19. Investigate a formalised community gardening forum with regular contact between all community gardeners to allow sharing of experiences and potential bulk buying of resources.
20. Set aside space in each existing allotment facility for a community garden with facilities to provide onsite training to people on the allotment waiting list and community gardeners.
21. Community gardens need 18 months (a full growing season) of on-going support when they are established to give the gardeners the confidence to be able to make decisions.
22. Make facilities child friendly; a number of respondents to surveys and focus groups claimed that being able to bring their children to allotments would motivate them to get involved.
23. Manage expectations. People expect a lot from 'Grow your Own' facilities; many expect the Council to take the lead in all aspects of running a facility, others expect minimal input from Council. The council must be careful to manage expectations, by being clear about the roles and responsibilities of the Council and participants, by making it clear that community gardens are not a panacea to social problems, and clarifying the financial and practical realities of establishing and running community gardens.
24. Create a resource pack or information pack that contains relevant information for those seeking to establish a community garden. A resource pack could include information on best practice,

Council policy on community gardens, and a list of useful contacts of organisations currently involved in community gardening in Belfast.

25. Maintain interest in Council community gardens by regularly engaging with and providing support to users. Without effective support and engagement, users will lose interest and the potential for failure of the project will increase.
26. Establish a team of Council gardeners that can be used to support community gardens and to help them increase their capacity, knowledge and confidence.
27. Work with other Council departments to encourage community gardens to be used as a resource to meet their own departmental objectives.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS - THE ALLOTMENTS AND COMMUNITY GARDEN STRATEGY

28. Development of the Allotments and Community Gardens Strategy should use the methodology developed via the Belfast City Council Community Planning project to engage the community.
29. BCC should introduce a matrix to help decide the location of all future 'Grow your Own' provision to ensure sustainability principles and equal opportunities are applied to decisions.
30. The wider benefits of 'Grow your Own' should be integrated within a strategy and across all statutory and private partnerships to realise the links with waste, health & well-being, procurement, education and community development etc.
31. Use the 'Community Gardens and Allotments Strategy' to demonstrate how health equity (HEiAP) can be integrated into all policies and identify ways to measure success.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS - GENERAL

32. BCC should consider available land in city parks for community garden, allotments or community orchards.
33. A review of public parks with wider consultation is necessary to ensure active engagement by the Council with all Belfast ratepayers.
34. The council website should include guidance documents for 'grow your own' users including information on how to prepare a plot, a timescale when different work should be done, what to do with produce come harvest and also have contact details for relevant council officers.
35. Use the council website to advertise potential training courses for allotment, community and private gardeners.

Conclusion

There is considerable interest in a '**Community Garden and Allotment Strategy**' for Belfast. In addition to developing a Strategy detailing how communities and individuals can get more involved in 'Grow your Own' initiatives, there are a number of operational issues that need addressing. These can be separated into issues for allotments and issues for community gardens.

A uniform sizing model needs to be adopted and applied to the new site at Musgrave and applied to other sites when plots become available. A Memorandum of Understanding should be developed that sets out what the council is responsible for and what is the responsibility of the allotment holders/committee. Allotment sites should be managed jointly between the council and the Allotment Committee. A regular audit of each allotment should be undertaken to increase the frequency in which plots become available.

A Memorandum of Understanding should also be established for each of the community gardens funded by the Council to establish responsibility and manage expectation. New community gardens that request funding should be subject to a detailed screening process using an assessment matrix to assess a number of suitability issues and their long-term sustainability. A programme of capacity building and skills development should be established to work in tandem with community gardens, potentially via partnership with the community development unit of the Council.

Other options for increasing available space should be considered including temporary grow spaces on land marked for development (but where funding is not yet secured), vacant land owned by other statutory agencies, under used land in city parks, farm share schemes and short term outreach grow projects.

The '**Community Garden and Allotment Strategy**' should be integrated with the objectives of other Belfast City Council departments and its potential impact in helping to address the wider determinants of health is recognised and promoted.