

Report on the Resilience of the Community Growing Sector in Northern Ireland

June 2020



Social Farms & Gardens



Celebrating
40
years
1980 - 2020



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Introduction



The Seed has been Planted

This report was completed in June 2020 during the Covid 19 pandemic. We left our offices in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry on 12 March 2020 and have not yet returned. The whole country has been in 'Lockdown' for 12 weeks to stop the spread of the corona virus. We were scheduled to have our annual forum for our members on Saturday 28th March at the wonderful Playtrail in Derry all the arrangements had been made, it was a packed agenda with workshops on everything from forest play to making a geodesic dome. We had booked a film maker to record all the activities, it had to be cancelled along with all the other small and large events planned across the world in this period.

For community gardeners the season was just beginning, seeds had been ordered and tentative shoots were emerging, nature was just waking up when the human world was closing down. It is our busiest time of year – what could we do in Lockdown? We were already working on a Growing Resilience programme across NI, building capacity, increasing skills, and strengthening networks; this was the time to be resilient. We took a chance, although suppliers had been inundated and temporarily closed, we sourced and ordered a large wholesale supply of organic vegetable seeds and launched 'Lockdown Gardening'. We were so grateful that our funder the National Lottery, Community Fund, People & Communities programme supported us. This was an initiative to support our community growing members to turn their growing from Community Growing to Growing in the Community – to distribute safely compost and seeds for people to grow at home or to bring on plants at their sites and then distribute them in their communities. It was urgent, people were at home and had the time, maybe for the first time in their lives, to germinate seed and grow their own supply of fresh vegetables. The community growing groups responded quickly and efficiently; we continue to support groups taking part in Lockdown gardening. We had filming in our minds from our cancelled forum event and initially thought the film maker could record our Lockdown videos but that was difficult with 'social distancing' so we set about it ourselves and the very popular 'Lockdown Videos' were launched with staff and members contributing.

The simple gardening at home of course is not always so simple, sometimes trial and error, but when you succeed - joy! To see a seed germinate is so hopeful, especially at a time of crisis it is good for the soul. This activity connects people with the wider discussion on the production of our food – where does it come from? how fresh is it? is it organic? what has it been sprayed with? food supplies and food security; It also connects people to the discussions on physical, mental and environmental wellbeing – how much the outdoors mean to us, how much nature contributes to our wellbeing – people are resetting their values.

As we take the tentative steps of coming out of Lockdown, we are facing, not just a recession but a depression while conversely nature is experiencing a recovery from less human activity. We have an opportunity to reset priorities. Can we transition to a new economy and environment that takes account of nature? – the seed has been planted.

Patricia Wallace, Country Lead Social Farms & Gardens

Miriam Turley, Growing Resilience Officer

Conor O'Kane, Growing Resilience Officer



Summary



Summary

In order to represent our members, Social Farms & Gardens has produced this report to try to set out areas in which community growing organisations can be better supported to play their role in community resilience.

Community Growing has become increasingly popular in Northern Ireland, and many communities are benefitting from increased access to the outdoors, lifelong learning, good food and community. The sector is built on the work of local community organisations and their volunteers, with a contribution in terms of land from support organisations, the statutory sector, local Councils and Housing Executive.

In recent months staff and volunteers in the community growing sector have worked tirelessly to ensure their neighbours remain fed and connected.

The sector is achieving so much and is well loved. But it is also precarious. Funding is short term and hard won, with many grants not contributing to staff or core costs. Land is not owned by the groups using it, and the quality of tenancy agreement varies. Encouragement for groups to develop social enterprises only works out for some groups and can be an unrealistic or unsuitable aim for others. The move to providing more healthcare in the community could place even more stress on the sector if not properly resourced and supported.

This report aims to describe the breadth of activity in the sector, summarise the needs of the sector, and make recommendations for how funders, commissioners and others in the statutory sector can structure their support to best support those working to improve the lives of people in their community. It was written with input from those working in the sector and aims to be representative.

In these uncertain times, with many challenges and opportunities on the horizon, not least the Covid 19 crisis and the climate emergency, a strong, connected community growing sector will provide stability and resilience in our communities, and is something to be proud of.

The fostering of resilience is critical to protecting and promoting health and wellbeing at both the individual and community level. Resilient communities respond proactively to new or adverse situations, prepare for economic, social, and environmental change and deal better with crisis and hardship.

The Cabinet Office's 2019 Community Resilience Development Framework states that:

"Community resilience is enabled when the public are empowered to harness local resources and expertise to help themselves and their communities to:

- prepare, respond, and recover from disruptive challenges, in a way that complements the activity of Category 1 and 2 emergency responders.
- plan and adapt to long term social and environmental changes to ensure their future prosperity and resilience.

Community resilience requires a participatory approach to emergency management."

■ The Current Sector

The Community Growing Sector in Northern Ireland

In recent years we have seen a substantial rise in interest in community growing which has produced a wide diversity of community growing initiatives. From community orchards to street planting schemes, from guerrilla gardening to forest gardens, the choice of what type of project to set up is broad and very much depends on the needs of the local community, the resources on offer and the type and area of land available.

This new interest in community growing has been supported by a number of different funding streams - through local Councils, the Housing Executive and the Public Health Agency, The European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland (Peace III) 2007 - 2013, which provided the financial basis for a number of new community gardens to be set up across Northern Ireland and the Border areas. Since then, the National Lottery Community Fund has provided project funding, and the National Lottery 'Space and Place' funding has provided capital grants for many projects.

In addition, there are a number of different agencies promoting community growing and allotments; notably Social Farms & Gardens, The Conservation Volunteers, Groundwork Northern Ireland, and Grow It Yourself. Together these organisations constitute a level of support for community growing initiatives.

Community growing delivers a variety of benefits to communities in a variety of ways. For example, from information provided by our members, community growing projects in NI deliver sessions to their members, increasing skills and health and wellbeing; they are increasing our food security; they are increasing biodiversity and providing much needed food for pollinators, urban gardens are recognised as being one of the most beneficial landscape types for pollinators. Some community gardens provide services on behalf of Government and statutory organisations, for example, therapeutic sessions for people with health needs through the health trusts and activities for people on probation.

Community gardens and allotments provide a space for community to grow, and while there can always be challenges in bringing people together and the interactions that follow, it is arguably preferable to the atomisation and isolation that characterise modern life.



Grow NI Community Garden, The Waterworks, North Belfast

While all these benefits are being delivered by community gardens in Northern Ireland, rarely will one project be able to deliver all of them. The strength of a project is dependent on the strength of the group running it, their internal and external relationships and the individual health and resilience of the people in the group. The physical infrastructure, while important, is secondary to the people. Funding and support for gardens could be as varied as the projects they are supporting, sometimes financial, sometimes in kind or operational support, sometimes networking and training, sometimes access to land. Support will work best when tailored to the group receiving it, and when based on a relationship of trust, and acknowledging the scant administrative resources in small groups. In reality some groups opt to avoid funding applications because of the administrative burden, and others suffer because their lead volunteers' time is taken up with paperwork. Additionally many groups do not have secure tenure on the land they are using.

The contribution these initiatives and groups have made and can continue to make can be maximised and appreciated at this time, and adaptations to the support they receive made to enable them to continue.

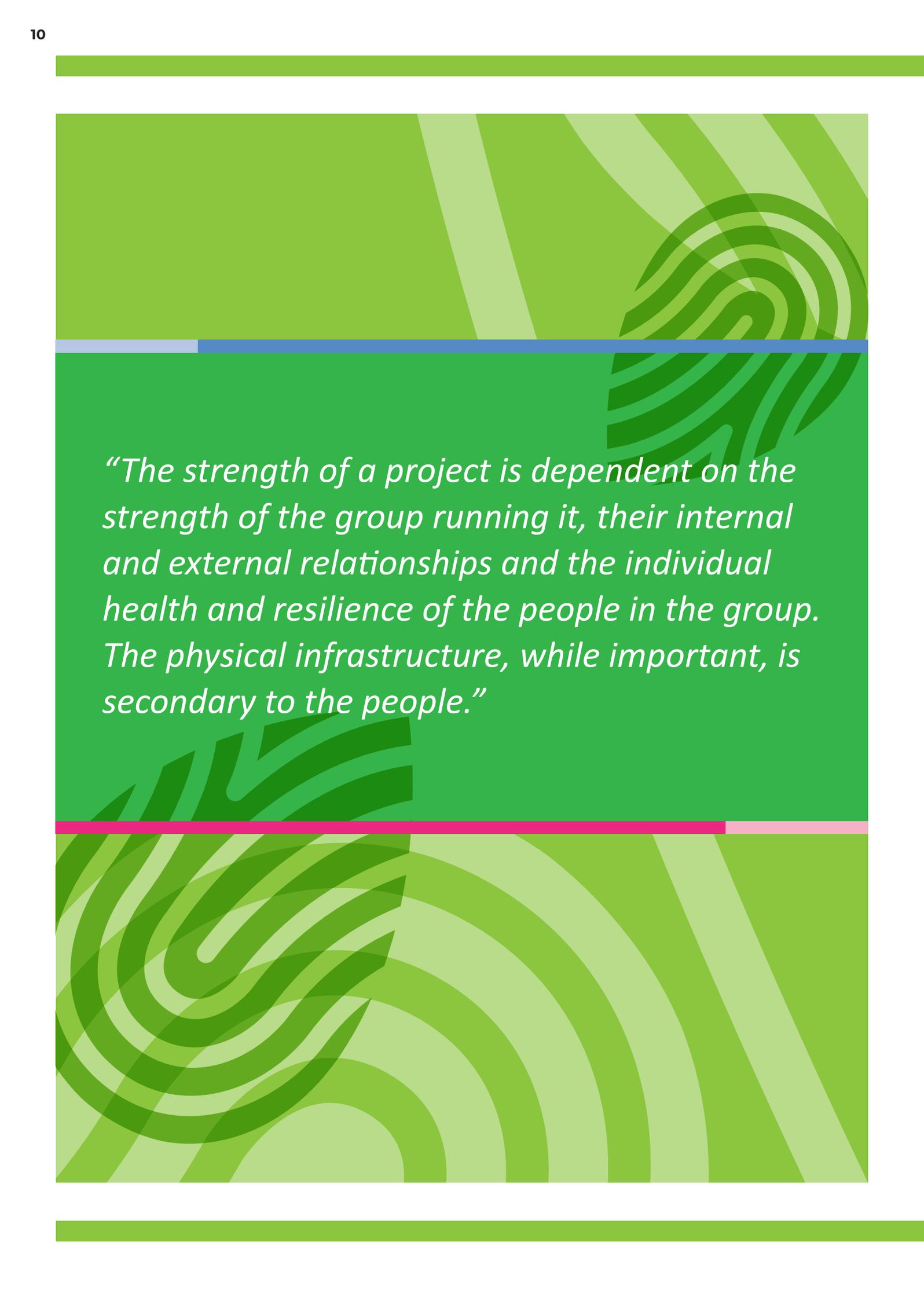
During the recent Covid 19 crisis small community growing groups around Northern Ireland were quick to respond, safely and effectively, to the needs of their communities. They led the way in diversifying their activities, providing food delivery to the vulnerable and isolated, checking in on neighbours through phone-round schemes, and later on in lockdown encouraging their neighbours to grow at home, so that fresh food is still being provided locally. Indeed the rise in interest in growing at home has been a positive feature of the crisis and could characterise the "new normal" after lockdown.

Other sites adapted their working practices and continued to operate, contributing to the local food supply in times when food insecurity was causing panic buying in the supermarkets.

The groups that were best able to adapt and respond quickly to the situation were the ones that had strong infrastructure in place: secure access to land and control of decision making processes, core funding or funding that could be repurposed, and strong core staff and volunteer teams.



Patrick Frew, Cloughmills Community Action Team

The background of the page is a vibrant green with abstract, overlapping patterns. On the right side, there is a large, stylized fingerprint-like pattern composed of concentric, wavy lines in various shades of green. The text is centered in the middle of the page, set against a solid green rectangular background. The text is in a white, italicized serif font. The overall design is modern and visually engaging, with a focus on organic and human-like forms.

“The strength of a project is dependent on the strength of the group running it, their internal and external relationships and the individual health and resilience of the people in the group. The physical infrastructure, while important, is secondary to the people.”

The Benefits of Community Growing

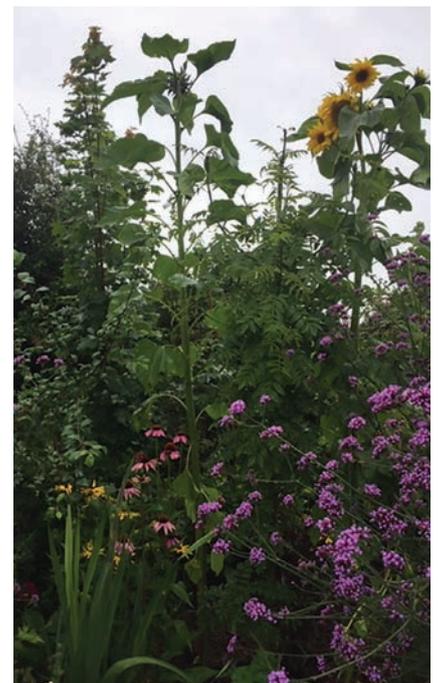
Over the last few years there has been a growing body of evidence supporting the benefits of community growing, green spaces and outdoor education for physical and mental wellbeing. Horticultural and other tasks involved in community growing such as regular exercise alongside healthier eating patterns, usually the result of eating fresh produce grown in the garden are often cited in such research. This **Garden Organic study** reviews the extensive scientific literature showing the benefits of gardening and community food growing for both physical and mental health. It presents a compelling case for action by health professionals and the NHS; local authority planners and Government planning policy specialists to create, protect and promote gardening and community food growing.

A 2015 report produced by FCFCG (Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens now Social Farms & Gardens) shows that involvement in community growing can act as a ‘powerful tool’ to help vulnerable people, bring communities together and encourage people to adopt greener and healthier behaviours. The report tracks the progress of growing and green space projects funded by Big Lottery Fund ‘Communities Living Sustainably’ programme.

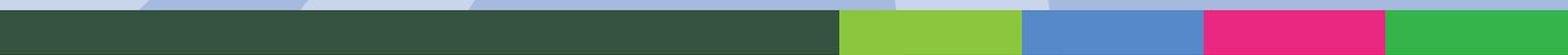
Most community growing projects are not just for “a little bit of gardening”; they encompass multifunctional sites that yield holistic and sustainable outcomes in areas such as: individual and community health and wellbeing; food production; tackling food waste including distributing surplus food; community development and community cohesion through working together and events like community meals; habitat conservation; climate action; watershed management; and social interaction - inspiring people to act on their own behalf and promoting both sharing and stewardship of land (See diagram page 12).

For this work to engage more people, the opportunities for community growing need to link to, and sometimes directly address, the intersecting issues in the community, like income levels, skills, engagement, capacity and other demographics and inequalities. The most successful community growing projects already do this, while many of our members may not yet recognise that they are actually in a strong position to do more.

Good for us and Good for Nature







Models of Community Growing

Community Gardens

Community gardens tend to be gardened and managed collectively by community groups, and through this approach have the potential to involve, and be of benefit to, a greater number of people. For this reason, community gardening is a common option for a new site when not much land is available, and where community development, cohesion and empowerment is a prime driver.

There are many different models of community garden - see diagram page 13 for some common types. The design of each garden is dependent on use, with some focused on the community side, others on health, others more production focused, and others designed for wildlife. Other factors affecting design are budget, features of the site aspect, slope etc, what the surroundings of the garden are and who will be using it.



Donegall Pass Community Garden - 'The Garden of Eatin'
Donegall Pass Community Forum



Eden Allotments - Participatory Budgeting Vote
Mid & East Antrim Council

Projects Based within a Larger Organisation

Some garden projects are under the wing of larger charities, for example mental health and disability charities or community associations, whose staff manage the financial and legal work of running the garden and gardeners run the practical side of things.

Some community gardens and allotments are managed by council, with varying degrees of management involvement from gardeners. Some local Councils have their own community growing strategies. The responsibility for allotments and community growing will straddle some departments of Council, for example, Land and Property/Estates, Parks and Open spaces and Leisure, and Community Development departments. Council and larger charity-owned projects often find there are benefits from having a formal or informal management committee made up of gardeners, as this increases participant involvement in running the garden, and provides valuable information and support to staff involved. Constituted management committees will find it easier to access funding for their project.

Health and Wellbeing Based Projects

Recent years have seen a growing number of health and wellbeing-based projects in Northern Ireland. All community garden projects provide an opportunity for increased physical and mental health for those using them, but some projects make this their main focus, and provide carefully designed sites and programmes with specific health outcomes in mind.

With the introduction of direct payments for placements on health focused programmes, new links are being formed between commissioners and small growing projects. The direct payments system can be time intensive for smaller projects to set up, as at the present time it involves reaching out and finding people who will benefit from the project for example making links with social workers and health professionals, trust staff and members of the public. Most projects working in this field will provide free taster sessions, and it is harder for smaller organisations to absorb the cost of this time. Block funding may suit smaller organisations better.

It is important for the sustainability and quality of the placements provided that health and wellbeing focused gardens are sufficiently recompensed for the placements they provide. This should include full cost recovery of, for example, the cost of training staff, of making site adjustments to accommodate the needs of participants, etc. Commissioners should also ensure that adequate training is available for projects hosting people with special needs, to safeguard all involved.

SF&G would like to suggest that such a referral fund, similar to the **Social Farming Referral Fund**, could benefit the sector, and should be discussed with all stakeholders to strengthen the sector during this transitional period.

Community Based Projects

Community growing projects that aim to be an open space for a range of people from the community often have a very different structure from more focused health and wellbeing projects. These projects may have a more horizontal structure, with less distinction between gardeners, participants, volunteers, and management. Community based projects may maximise the empowerment potential of including gardeners in the management of the site and programme. This is something that may be missing from gardens and allotments managed by larger organisations and councils, as discussed above.



Suzi Miller, Peas Park, North Belfast



Shared Space Projects

Peace Gardening

At one time in Northern Ireland, Shared Space would have been considered places where members of Protestant and Catholic communities could live or use space together regardless of their religious background. The concept of shared space now includes people from all religious and ethnic backgrounds, physical abilities, class, gender, and other factors. On a local platform, increased diversity within society had moved the agenda beyond a Protestant/Catholic discussion to encompass the multiple new minority ethnic communities, both established and emerging. Economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers often have other needs that need to be taken into consideration when developing shared spaces. Northern Ireland boasts a number of Peace Gardening sites, where the emphasis of design, communication and activities is on respect and inclusion.

Gardens of Sanctuary



For people who are forced to flee conflict and persecution to find safety and sanctuary elsewhere, community gardens, city farms and other growing spaces can offer vital and unique opportunities to find community, improve mental and physical health and to learn and share skills. In 2019 Social Farms & Gardens and City of Sanctuary, in partnership with GROW NI, ran a training on Gardens of Sanctuary, looking at the needs of Community Garden projects aiming to host refugees and asylum seekers. The main messages from the training were that working with asylum seekers and refugees

requires a great deal of skill and training. While there are several highly skilled practitioners working in Northern Ireland, inexperienced gardens may host people with complex needs with the best of intentions, but without the necessary skills and training. Gardens hosting refugees and asylum seekers must be properly and consistently resourced, have access to training for staff and volunteers in hosting roles, and have chances to network with other similar projects to share experiences and resources.

The Gardens of Sanctuary resource pack, report and case studies provide information about involving asylum seekers and refugees in gardens, and can be accessed at <https://cityofsanctuary.org/group-activities/gardens-of-sanctuary/>

Voluntary Projects

Many smaller projects that run on little or no budget. Examples of this include guerrilla gardening, alleyway gardening and the well-known Incredible Edible movement. Operating on a small budget has many benefits, including minimising paperwork and arduous administrative work, flexibility and adaptability, independence of aims and objectives, ability to respond to local need and conditions, asking for help locally

from businesses and other organisations, relying on volunteer labour and good will, and a DIY/recycling culture; this involves reusing materials, developing skills to build and make things yourself rather than buying them in. Most local councils provide in-kind support to community gardens, either through access to land, or community development support. These practices have value in themselves, as they rely on and build social capital, and are sustainable in the longer term.

Community Growing During Covid 19

As time has gone on there is increasing evidence that transmission of the Covid19 virus outside is less likely. This obviously gives hope to community gardens that with sensible social distancing practices in place and rotational workloads, they may become safe centres for meaningful socialising and work. To allow safe work in community gardens users must be prepared to follow stricter rules than were hitherto adhered to.

Lockdown Gardening Project

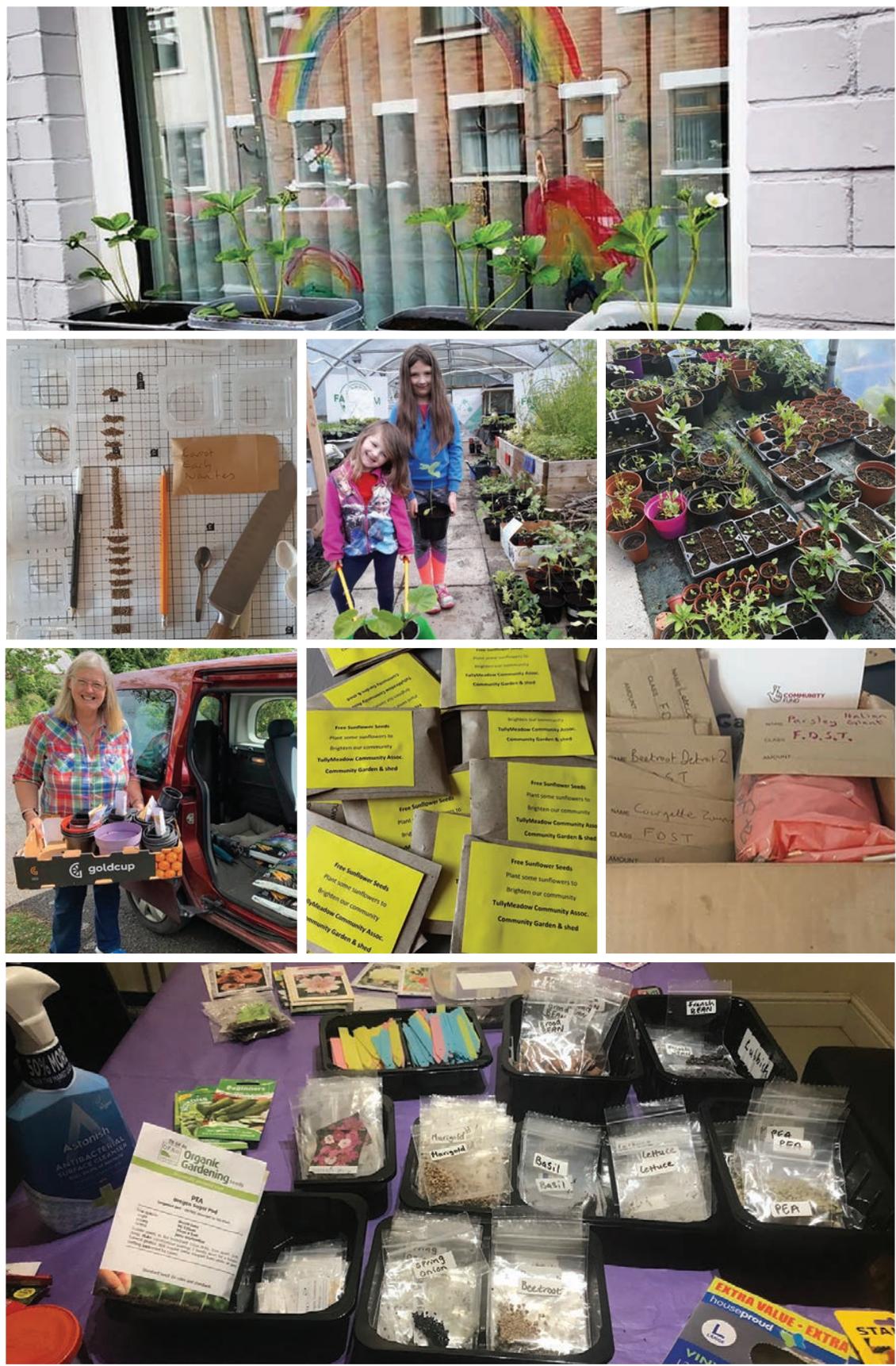
During the lockdown, food gardening really took off with more people taking it up than ever before – and this in the face of difficulties obtaining basic supplies like compost and seeds. It would seem that our basic need to hoard for security can be translated into a wiser and wider need to create a store of growing plants, shared and saved seeds and a wider sharing of knowledge, hints and tips through videos, blogs, and live online gardening sessions. Social Farms & Gardens launched ‘Lockdown Gardening’. We were so grateful that our funder the National Lottery, Community Fund, People & Communities programme supported us. This was an initiative to support our community growing members to turn their growing from Community Growing to Growing in the Community. It was urgent, people were at home and had the time, maybe for the first time in their lives, to germinate seed and grow their own supply of fresh vegetables. The community growing groups responded quickly and efficiently; We produced a series of Lockdown Gardening videos https://www.facebook.com/pg/farmgarden.NorthernIreland/videos/?ref=page_internal which proved extremely popular themselves. We enabled community gardens throughout Northern Ireland to play an active role in their communities at this time. Some chose to distribute seeds and compost to new gardeners while others grew on plants for later distribution, some did a mixture of both. 28 gardens were involved in the initial phase with great feedback and results coming in. These included traditional community gardens, new community groups without a site, school groups, disability action groups, and allotment projects amongst others.

Safe sites

Some larger sites such as Ballymagowan Allotments in Derry~Londonderry concentrated on food production with fewer people on site. Ballymagowan, which supplies food to the local Social Supermarket had workers who continued to tend their crops and took more land into production during the lockdown.

We applaud the good practice, ingenuity, and inventiveness of all our community growers, as whatever funding environment they find themselves in, they consistently manage to grow plants and deliver huge benefits to their communities.





The Current Social Farms & Gardens' Covid 19 survey



Mark Roberts, Playtrail, Derry/Londonderry

The Social Farms & Gardens Members' survey was carried out in April and May 2020 and is helping us understand how the current situation is affecting our 1600+ members across the UK, how they are responding to the crisis, and what their support needs are. It builds a picture of how the pandemic is affecting our sector nationally.

It found that in Northern Ireland one third of respondents' projects were closed completely and others were operating in some manner.

Half of the projects were carrying out site maintenance, food growing and gardening (with social distancing). 12% expected to grow less food than usual, 33% expected to grow more, and 25% expected to grow the same as usual. 38% of groups are facing financial issues or reduced funding as a direct result of the crisis. 42% of Northern Ireland members are already working with others in their communities to help support vulnerable people or are planning on doing so.



Support for Community Growing

Funding for the Community Growing Sector



Most community growing projects are currently reliant on independent trust funding. Community growers we spoke to say they spend a lot of unpaid hours completing applications and administering grants. Most grants do not pay core costs, a notable exception is the National Lottery Community Fund, who encourage applicants to apply for full cost recovery. Timely delivered funding is essential to allow programmes to run, assets to be maintained and developed, staff to be paid and a sense of security to surround a project. Expecting or allowing a quality project which is caring for vulnerable people in the community and using the hard-won skills of staff and volunteers to run on a shoestring is not sustainable, and ultimately counterproductive.

Funders, Councils and other statutory bodies in Northern Ireland are starting to change the way they work with smaller groups, for example by building direct personal relationships with groups, making application forms and grant processes more appropriate, and championing the work done by small community groups in their area. Support organisations, for example, The Conservation Volunteers, Groundwork, Grow It Yourself (GIY), Social Farming Support Service and Social Farms & Gardens, can also provide a valuable link between larger funders and support organisations and smaller community growing projects.

Some groups advertise for volunteers with administrative and grant writing skills, but this kind of volunteer takes a long time to train and often moves on. Some groups say they prefer to run things on volunteer labour and get help from local businesses or other organisations. Others are skilled at running events or other fundraisers, and a few have capital assets that produce a regular income which funds their activities.

It seems the Covid 19 crisis allowed funders more flexibility. Northern Ireland funders responded to the crisis by adapting application procedures and project priorities, offering additional unrestricted funding to some projects, rediverting funds into new schemes, and communicating with funded projects to encourage them to adapt what they were doing to the situation. This rapid empowerment of local communities was needed and appreciated.

Some Councils have found ways to support communities in their growing without directly managing the site, for example by providing the land, maintaining water and boundaries, providing free compost and seeds, providing meeting space free of charge for management associations, or offering to help with printing costs etc, providing occasional parks staff to help with the heavier jobs on site, providing networking events for community growers, and providing financial assistance through their small grants schemes.

Community growing projects that are meeting a public need should be publicly funded. Community growing projects deliver health and well-being and community health and social well-being, social cohesion, community relations and community care all responsibilities of central, regional, and local government. Very few projects receive public funding, and where they do, they have had to establish additional resources, skills, and knowledge in accessing, administering, and accounting for the funding. In pursuit of this it diverts the projects from their core activities. Many groups we spoke to say they survive in spite of local funding.



“Our experience is that our community garden has kept going in spite of a lack of local funding. I can’t imagine what it would be like if, for example, the Council or the PHA saw what we are doing and offered to pay our core costs and freed up our workers to do the work. It is hard; while you are scrabbling round looking for funding from Trusts you have no energy to focus on the resources that are under your nose – you almost miss seeing the potential of the people around you and their creativity to take a project forward. You can be worrying about how to satisfy a funder rather than looking at where people’s energy is at.”



“We recently got long term funding, which we are so happy about, but the application process was all consuming. You have to take your eye off everything else, it is not just the person writing the application, the whole organisation gets pulled in, and sometimes there’s no energy for anything else.”

Community Asset Transfer

Asset transfer is a process to allow a community organisation to take over publicly owned land or buildings, in a way that recognises the public benefits that the community use will bring. This may be at a discounted price, with a grant or other support, or simply the agreement to transfer something the public authority did not plan to sell.

Supporting community asset transfer is one way public bodies can increase the resilience of local groups responding to local need.

Communities having ownership of an asset can contribute to many common goals. Communities who own and manage their own assets are able to protect key local service/facilities that may otherwise be lost, and allows generation of income that can be re-invested locally. It allows better stewardship of local assets because the community owns and uses them. It can change attitudes and relationships, because it gives the group credibility with funders/other stakeholders and heightens the group's profile and improves perceptions of it. Local ownership of assets instils a renewed sense of pride and confidence in the community, provides local people with a meaningful stake in the future development of the place in which they live and/or work and can increase participation - membership, volunteering, attendance at meetings. Independence and control over the future of the asset can allow groups to make long-term plans and give leverage, enabling the community to negotiate further investment.



Kelley Hann, Drumnaph Community Nature Reserve

Though there are examples of different types of Community Asset Transfer (CAT) in Northern Ireland, there is still the need for a major culture shift to staff in statutory organisations recognising the potential for CAT to unlock the power of communities to address their own needs. This may take the form of councils and other statutory landowners establishing a register of land suitable for CAT, and staffing the management of community applications to use such land, including support for communities to negotiate that use, as well as the implementation of an NI wide policy around CAT, currently in the hands of DSD, supported by Development Trust NI (DTNI). DTNI have run a number of successful events, especially around trying to communicate examples of best practice from Scotland, where Community Asset Transfer is well supported in government legislation and there is a rich case study history providing evidence of its benefits. DTNI are also working with a number of councils in NI to list their assets, the first step in making them more accessible to communities.

During the last few months there had been a groundswell in people wanting to work to improve their local communities and contribute to the food supply. During the "Stay at Home" period people have looked to their neighbourhood and communities and have seen how community growing could improve them. The demand for access to land is at an all time high.

SF&G can envisage a future where statutory landowners encourage communities to approach them with their vision for statutory-owned land, work creatively with them to make it happen, and recognise that this approach gives projects the best chance of success. Indeed, some local Councils, and the Housing Executive are encouraging this approach within their own staff.

Models of Community Growing Networks around the UK and Ireland

At Social Farms & Gardens we know that the conversations and connections made between community gardens will lead to a stronger voice for the sector in general. Research demonstrates that higher levels of social capital are associated with better individual and community health and well-being. Here are some examples of community growing networks in the UK and Ireland that connect people and strengthen local resilience.

Growing Resilience Networks in Northern Ireland

SF&G have been working for the past 5 years in Northern Ireland to create online and real-life networks between community garden groups. The Growing Resilience programme, supported by the National Lottery Community Fund, works to support staff and volunteers in the community growing sector to connect, share skills, build confidence and support one another; strengthening their ability to work sustainably and withstand changes in an ever-changing landscape.

Growing Resilience networks are based on shared interests, shared experience and problems involved in running a community growing projects, and trying to encourage warm personal connections between the people in the sector, by making events convivial, with a focus on food, and bringing people together regularly, allowing friendships to develop. The feedback from this work and the effect on the sector so far has been great. During the Covid 19 crisis members have shared support and information, seeds, plants and inspiration to rise to meet the challenge.



Common Ground NI

Incredible Edible

Incredible Edible Todmorden is a local food partnership that encourages community engagement through local growing. Incredible Edible started small, with the planting of a few community herb gardens in Todmorden, and today has spin-offs in the U.S. and Japan, counting over 100 groups in the UK and 600 world-wide. Incredible Edible empowers ordinary people to take control of their communities through active civic engagement, redefining prosperity through the power of small actions.

Nottingham Growers Network

NGN is a networking initiative that aims to build links between community growing groups in the Nottingham area, who share an interest in gardening with respect and care for the environment. The work of the initiative will also be shaped by what groups would like. Membership of the network is open throughout the Nottingham and surrounding area.

Bristol Food Network

Bristol Food Network C.I.C. supports, informs, and connects individuals, community projects, organisations and businesses who share a vision to transform Bristol into a sustainable food city. The network among other things, runs the Bristol Food Connections Festival, runs campaigns, has published a food action plan for Bristol, and provides information and resources.

Community Gardens Ireland

CGI works to support and promote community gardens in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The organisation is entirely volunteer run. Through Facebook and the group's website they connect projects with each other, providing support and promotion, and the exchange of ideas. CGI hold gatherings around the island of Ireland, in various garden venues, including networking and training in each event.

Grow It Yourself

Local GIY groups began by meeting in person to share their knowledge and develop new ideas, building awareness for a sustainable and healthy lifestyle. Each local group would hold a monthly meeting where there would be a variety of activities, including guest speakers, seed and seedling swaps, garden/farm visits and demonstrations. Members are also encouraged to form meitheals with their fellow GIYers to complete any gardening related tasks that would be too big for one person to do alone e.g. making raised beds or pruning an orchard. In recent years GIY groups moved increasingly online, and there are a number of well used local GIY facebook groups.

Dublin Community Growers

Dublin Community Growers is a network of community gardeners who meet monthly within central Dublin. An open group, they meet to discuss community gardening projects, and the issues faced by these projects. Dublin Community Growers also organise events to promote community gardens as amenities to be valued. The core ethos of Dublin Community Growers is represented by social inclusion, and environmental responsibility. Dublin Community Growers support organic principles and animal welfare.

Conclusion

Community Growing is thriving in Northern Ireland, and is contributing vastly to local health, environment, and community. However, an unrealistic expectation has been placed upon the voluntary community growing sector to deliver statutory responsibilities without sufficient support or funding. While this is one of the most vibrant sectors in Northern Ireland's community and voluntary sector, it is also one of the most precarious. A strategic approach to supporting the community growing sector will pay off in terms of increased capacity in the sector, less burnout, staff and volunteer retention and ultimately better provision for beneficiaries.

Community Development

Community growing makes a unique contribution to community development, good relations and social cohesion. Community growing provides a communal space for people to come together, a valuable 'Shared Space' in our communities. Community growing must come from the community, and when it does, it needs nurtured supported and resourced.

Health and Well-Being

Community growing provides the opportunity for people to come together to experience and enjoy growing healthy fresh food. Slowing down to the pace of nature gives real health benefits to physical and mental well-being. Sometimes the simplest projects are achieving the greatest impact on personal and community health and well-being, achieving the targets in local council community plans and targets in strategies of government departments.

Specific Physical and Mental Health Benefits

The physical, mental and social health benefits have been well documented. Social Prescribing and Green Prescriptions for specific health needs have been talked about for nearly 10 years but adequate administration and financial resources have not been allocated.

Strategic Approaches to Unlocking Land Assets for Community Use

Support is required across all local and regional government, and public agencies to facilitate the access and management of land by local communities.

Recognition of Expertise and Training

The skills and expertise in this sector in NI need to be recognised. Future training needs planned with academic and educational bodies for community horticulture, social and therapeutic horticulture, eco-therapies, specific design requirements for sites and specialist horticulture techniques.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to contribute to the conversation about how to build a thriving community growing sector in Northern Ireland.

Support for the Community Growing Sector

1. The role of community growing projects in fulfilling a range of needs in our society, including a response to the Covid 19 crisis and climate emergency should be recognised and taken into account when considering support for the sector.
2. The nature of the organisations fulfilling these roles should also be recognised, as small, locally based, volunteer led, adaptable and embedded. Support should be tailored to their strengths and needs, which may not be the same as other community and voluntary sector organisations.
3. The range of models of community growing projects should be recognised and valued by those providing support to them.
4. Community growing projects starting out should be given as much support as they need with the aim of autonomous management of the site by gardeners but allowing as much time as each group needs in the journey to autonomy and self-sufficiency.

Funding for the Community Growing Sector

5. The benefits of community growing projects straddle many functions of local government, a range of NI government departments and associated public agencies. Accordingly this makes it very difficult for projects to access appropriate statutory support and resources. Following on from the exemplar pilot programmes that have been carried out on hard-won short-term funding and the good will of the sector, a new funding resource should be established for the community growing sector. This would allow projects to engage with local and regional government and public agencies, enabling them to access statutory support and resources and to co-devise appropriately resourced programmes. For example engagement is required with:
 - Department for Communities – Unique Contribution to Community Development
 - Department of Health - Social Prescribing/Green Prescriptions
 - Public Health Agency – Health and Well-being
 - Department of Education, Training and Employment - Training
 - Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister - Cross cutting themes
 - Local Councils, NI Housing Executive, Department of Communities and the Development Trust NI – Land Access and Community Asset transfers.
6. Funders, commissioners and support organisations should develop direct face to face relationships with those they are working with to determine what each group needs.

7. Longer term contracts and funding cycles should be considered to allow projects to retain staff, reduce time spent working on funding applications, allow relationships to develop between staff and participants, and allow long-term strategic thinking within projects and the sector.
8. In funding and supporting projects which are hosting people with special health needs, funders and commissioners should assess the method of funding and consider a range of funding models to find a suitable option for the project in question.
9. Free taster sessions for health and wellbeing placements should be funded by commissioners on an ongoing basis.
10. A referral fund similar to the Social Farming Referral Fund should be developed for community growing projects.

Land for Community Growing Projects

11. All public agencies should develop community asset transfer policies. This could lead to creating and maintaining an online register of unwanted and underused land and assets and having staff and procedures for transferring assets to community groups that are willing and able to manage them.
12. Public agencies should network with community groups and each other to discover land use agreements which work for all involved to maximise benefit for the public.

Training for the Community Growing Sector

13. Future training should be planned with academic and educational bodies for community horticulture, social and therapeutic horticulture, eco-therapies, specific design requirements for sites and specialist horticulture techniques.
14. A coordinated programme of training should be provided to all health and wellbeing projects, but especially those providing services for our Health Trusts and the Public Health Agency. This could be funded and designed by a consortium of community growers, service users, social and therapeutic horticulture practitioners, support organisations, commissioners, and funders.

Case Studies

Case Studies from

Cloughmills Community Action Team

GROW NI

Lackan Cottage Farm

Castlecaufield Horticultural Society during Covid 19

Peas Park

Stormont Workplace Allotments

Community Alley Growing

Blossoms at Larne Lough

Common Ground NI Nature Based Therapies

Follow this link

<https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/40-years-40-stories>

Social Farms & Gardens



About us

Our vision and mission

Our vision

People and communities reaching their full potential through nature-based activities as a part of everyday life.

Our mission

To improve the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and the environment through nature-based activities.

Our history

In April 2018, the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens and Care Farming UK merged to form Social Farms & Gardens. The charity combines over 60 years' experience of farming, gardening and growing.

Our 1,000 plus members are unified by one vision – the use of nature-based activities as a catalyst to transform the lives of people and the communities in which they live.

What we do

Advocate and campaign for greater recognition, funding and opportunities for nature-based activities.

We present a united voice for organisations and groups delivering nature-based activities. We influence policy makers and work with partners in the voluntary, public, private and academic sectors to improve the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and the environment.

Provide expert advice, support and a free membership scheme to support communities to grow in sustainable ways. We are proud to support thousands of grass root organisations from small fruit and veg plots on urban housing estates to large-scale rural care farms, transforming lives and connecting people.

Design and deliver innovative training programmes which empower and enable communities to thrive and grow. We provide practical support and training UK wide to thousands of grass roots organisations and groups.

Forge pathways for our members to access commissioned services and demonstrate that they deliver high quality provision. We promote income generating opportunities for organisations and groups to ensure they can sustain their activities. We promote quality assurance for members to deliver their work with confidence, pride and impact.

