

Sustaining your community garden

All gardens begin with good intentions, but because of the absence of a workable long term management plan some can become derelict and unloved. This guide outlines good practice to ensure the long term sustainability of community gardens and is based on research into 12 projects in Northern Ireland. It highlights how encouraging self-organisation in community growing projects can contribute to a good long term management plan.

Sustaining Volunteers

Some community gardens do not succeed because people who were initially involved lose enthusiasm and no longer want to be actively involved. Sustaining volunteer involvement and ensuring continuity are key elements in ensuring the long term success of your project. The following tips will help you to achieve this.

A clear vision

At their best, community gardens reflect the needs of the community in which they are based. Undertaking a planning and visioning process for your community garden will give people the opportunity to discuss and reach agreement about the purpose of the garden, and should minimise any chance of conflict emerging when it comes to





developing and managing the garden. This can be done through a questionnaire, informal group discussion or a large public meeting.

A simple exercise for visioning exercise is to construct an A3 mindmap on paper with your group: everyone contributes their ideas to what your inputs, outputs, assets and goals are. You may very well be surprised at how different your ideas are! The main thing is to focus on what you have in common, or discuss how to incorporate everyone's vision. See the *Resources* section for more information.

Having an agreed vision means that volunteers getting involved know what the garden is trying to achieve. It can be hard for people to maintain commitment to a project which constantly changes its purpose to suit different funding streams, or does not have a clear purpose.

Skills audit

A skills audit can help to identify the skills that volunteers themselves can apply to develop and sustain the project. Everyone has ability; all volunteers who participate should be able to contribute to the management of the community garden so long as they are willing.

You can also use a skills audit to identify skills that are missing as well. You can then find ways to upskill your volunteers, or recruit volunteers with the required skills.

Training

Confidence can be a barrier to active participation in community gardens. Training can help tackle this. Many community gardens have either formally or informally provided training to develop participants' horticultural skills. Building the capacity of volunteers gives participants the confidence to apply their skills to develop of the garden.

Employing staff

Most projects agree that they would like to employ a gardener or coordinator to oversee the project. Community gardens especially can benefit from someone to coordinate planting, sourcing materials and use of space. However, employing someone can lead to problems funding runs out and paid staff have been overly relied on.

If you are thinking of employing someone, or even getting someone in on a placement to carry out a project, try to plan what will happen when they finish. Avoid the situation where paid staff take on responsibility for all aspects of the project and try to make sure that they don't hold all the practical information about the project, as this can be a problem if they leave taking all their knowledge with them.

Having a paid staff member can also sometimes disempower volunteers, as all administrative and planning tasks get left to the staff. It could be worth making the focus of a gardener's job description to empower and include volunteers in the management of the garden, rather than directly carrying out tasks themselves.

Diversity of activities

Try to provide a diverse range of activities in which participants can get involved. These could include, for example, beekeeping, cooking, preparing natural cosmetics, rural crafts, building and DIY sessions.

Organising regular events can also bring new people into the garden and re-energise current volunteers. Don't be afraid to be creative! Colin Glen Allotments held a stargazing night and Grove Park Community Garden made scarecrows with the volunteers.

Celebrate achievements

Give participants the opportunity to present their achievements and to share the produce.

Communication

Good communication is a key factor in sustaining any community growing project. Your first step is to be clear who the garden stakeholders are - who you will need to communicate with - and then you can work out the best way to go about this.

Your management team

How do your core team communicate with each other? Traditional meetings can get decisions made fast, but sometimes the bigger picture is forgotten.

Often the issues that trip a project up in the long term are decision making, group organisation and dynamics – and conflict. Everyone can work together on their assertiveness, listening and facilitation skills, learn techniques for dealing with tension, and become aware of cultural and gender differences. This will strengthen your project. It will also give your team valuable skills they can use elsewhere in their lives. See *Resources* for more information.

Volunteers

It can be especially beneficial to enable volunteers to have their say and influence decisions that are made about the community garden. A level of democratic participation reflects shared responsibility and commitment to the development and management of the community garden.

Having a steering group that meets on a regular basis is a good way to facilitate communication with volunteers.

The wider community

Your local community is made up of a variety of established groups of people who could get involved in your project. Engaging with these groups can help you to understand what local needs your project can meet. It can also encourage more people to get involved and support your project. Funding applications will also be stronger if you can include evidence of having consulted your community and demonstrate support and need for the project.

Local government

Local councils can provide practical advice, support and even funding. It is important to really sell the project to the

council in order to secure support throughout the lifetime of the project. Make them aware of the benefits that the community garden could have. Do your research and provide them with evidence on demand and why the community garden is needed. You must have a realistic approach as simply having a community garden will not guarantee support.

Work in partnership

Working with partners in the local and national community level can benefit your community garden by providing access to resources, advice and support. For example, groups can apply for free trees from the Woodland Trust, or sustainable water management advice from NI Water. FCFCG provides advice, training and networking opportunities to member organisations, and there are countless other support organisations that are keen to help.

Methods of communication

Social networking

Social networking sites such as facebook and twitter are a quick, easy and effective way to contact potential and current participants of the community garden, other

community groups, the media and local organisations.

Social media allows participants to communicate with each other, which can help build a sense of community, and to organise themselves - to meet up to do some work or arrange an event.

Social media is also a great way of advertising and promoting the project and upcoming events to a wider audience.

One of the main barriers can be lack of internet literacy. This can be addressed by holding a training session.

Face to face

Speaking face to face seems to be the most effective means of communication between participants in community gardens.

In particular, having a specific day of the week that participants meet to work in the garden encourages regular attendance and therefore regular communication.

Try to find a day and time that suits the majority of participants, to meet – perhaps with lunch. Having a place for people to sit and talk is an essential element in the design of a community garden. This can range from a bench, to a hut with a kettle, to a Mongolian Yurt with a wood fired stove!

Texts

Text messaging is a relatively new form of communication between participants in community gardens. A contact sheet in which people can fill in their names and contact numbers is useful for ensuring you can contact most participants.

Paper communication

Other forms of communication include posting information on notice boards. The best place for a notice board is often just





outside the garden so people can see information even when the community garden is closed. Placing articles in the local newspaper can be useful for communicating with potential participants and promoting the garden.

Economic sustainability

Grants and funding are effective means in order to get a community garden off the ground. However, a more self-organised and sustainable garden project will draw financial support and resources from the community, i.e. will trade, borrow, share and generate income as much as possible.

Encourage in-kind donations

It is more sustainable for a garden to receive donations in kind rather than spending the money they have on resources. It is worth developing relationships with the local council and local businesses in your community.

Some garden centres have donated products to community gardens in Northern Ireland which has no doubt significantly reduced costs. Local garden centres may also donate plants that would

otherwise be thrown out but with careful nurturing could be restored and sold on.

A wish list on social networking sites, your website or noticeboard can also be useful for encouraging donations in-kind from the public, and getting what the garden really needs.

Borrow, trade and share

If there is another community garden close by then it is a good idea to meet and discuss the possibility of sharing resources such as tools. Seed swapping is also good idea.

Funding applications

You can get support in applying for funding from your local Community and Voluntary Association (e.g. NICVA). Here are some key questions to consider when filling in a funding application:

- Who will use the garden and what will they use it for?
- What issues in your community could the proposed community garden help to address?
- What other initiatives happening or planned in your community could complement the proposed community garden?
- What local businesses, organisations and groups in your community would benefit from working in partnership with your proposed community garden?

And always pay close attention to the funder's eligibility criteria. You will be wasting your time if your project doesn't meet these.

Even if the community garden is fortunate enough to receive external funding at times, this is unlikely to be enough to sustain the garden in the long term.

Don't put all your eggs in one basket: sustainability requires diversification and several income streams. There are many ways in which community gardens are ensuring their financial sustainability.

Membership fees

Participants can be annually charged a set price per person. These need to be set at a realistic level in order to sustain the garden, whilst still ensuring accessible that membership is still accessible for those who are on a low income.

Social enterprise

Social enterprise is a way in which the community garden can become a centre for employment and provision training, food and plants that people would be willing to pay for.

It is important to do your market research to establish what the community want and what is feasible on your site. Vegetables do not have a big profit margin unless grown on a commercial scale, and so might not be suitable for sale. If you do decide to sell veg, think about how you will price your produce: Hanging baskets, on the other hand, may sell well. See *Resources* below for more information.

Holding training courses and charging a fee to attend can generate money for your community garden. Taking advantage of the time of year can also encourage more participants and therefore more money. For example, since many community gardens grow willow it is a good idea to use this for willow basket making courses in early spring. Participants will also be more encouraged to attend and spend their money if they have something they can take home.

Five key points to bear in mind:

- Social enterprises deliver

much needed service outcomes in all areas.

- Good social enterprises are models of 'sustainable development in action'.
- Social enterprises can often deliver where other sectors will not/cannot deliver.
- With support, training and finance, social enterprises can and do succeed
- Visible and local support can greatly improve social enterprise viability and sustainability.

Events

Holding events with an entry fee at certain times of year can also generate money for your community garden. Many community gardens hold a harvest festival in the late summer which provides the opportunity to increase volunteers and sell produce from the garden.

Environmental Sustainability

A self-organised and sustainable community garden is one in which natural resources and time are efficiently used. This includes as little waste being generated as possible. Ecological design includes reducing waste, managing resource use and planting for low maintenance.

Reduce, reuse, recycle!

Reducing the resources you use, and reusing as much as possible will cut costs and benefit the environment, eg avoid disposable gloves, and buy good quality hard wearing seed trays so you can get a few years' use from them.

Using donated second hand materials (for example scaffolding planks for raised beds) also builds relationships with the people and organisations donating them, which may be fruitful in the future.

Upcycling is a common practice in most community gardens and is highly beneficial particularly because it enhances the value of the product compared to recycling. Not only does upcycling reduce waste but it also saves money for those who are gardening on a relatively small budget and enables people to be creative. Some examples include planting in old tyres, a broken teapot becoming a birdhouse, and toilet roll tubes used to grow peas in.

Resource Management

Many community gardens manage their organic waste by composting and recycling it to enhance the fertility of the soil and reduce the amount of money spent on importing compost. It is important that the participants learn the basic science of composting in order to ensure this aspect of the garden is maintained properly. This can be achieved through informal discussions, workshops to provide new members with skills and by inviting people to nominate themselves to be responsible for specific tasks such as turning the compost.

A lot of community gardens also collect rainwater. This means that less water is wasted through run-off and you do not have to spend money on installing plumbing. Design your rainwater harvesting to take account of periods of low rainfall during the summer by including a sizable storage tank.

Plant for low maintenance

Consider what plants are going to be in your community garden and how you are going to plant them. It is a good idea to plant perennials because they do not have to be replanted every year. No-dig gardening reduces work and improves the fertility of your garden in the long run.

Consider planting schemes which reduce the water needs of the garden, for example including ground cover plants or mulch, and reducing the spacings between plants.

Resources

For more information on all of these topics become a member of FCFCG, which will give you access to hundreds of resources and factsheets.

www.farmgarden.org.uk/join

Social enterprise

Social Enterprise Europe

A group of practitioners, consultants, action and university based researchers, trainers and social entrepreneurs concerned with the building of social wealth.

www.socialenterpriseeurope.co.uk

Charity Bank Ltd

Charity Bank is a new concept in banking and charity. Its sole business is to accept deposits in order to create a source for affordable loans to the charitable sector – for those who might otherwise find it difficult to access finance on terms they can meet.

www.charitybank.org



UnLtd

UnLtd supports social entrepreneurs by providing a complete package of funding and support to help individuals make their ideas a reality.

www.unltd.org.uk

Social Enterprise Coalition

The Social Enterprise Coalition is a membership organisation and represents a wide range of social enterprises, regional and national support networks and other related organisations.

www.socialenterprise.org.uk

Communication and group dynamic skills

Campaign Central

Connecting, informing and supporting campaigners. A web-based resource for anyone starting and running a campaign. Topics and downloads include funding your campaign, working with the media and influencing decision makers.

www.campaigncentral.org.uk

Cooperatives UK

From Conflict to Co-operation is a series of five booklets from Co-operatives UK which aims to help enterprises not only deal with conflict when it arises but also avoid unnecessary conflict.

www.uk.coop/fromconflict2co-operation



**Federation of
& City Farms
Community
Gardens**

The Rhizome Network

The Rhizome Network are a co-op providing facilitation, mediation, consensus building and training to grassroots activists and communities across the UK, and to those organisations that support activism in all its forms.

<http://rhizomenetwork.wordpress.com/resources>

Creating and sharing a community vision

The Community Toolbox

The Community Tool Box was created to help people build healthier communities and bring about the changes they envision. These two links hold information on strategic planning and creating a shared vision, but the site has many more resources.

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/leadership-functions/develop-and-communicate-vision/main>

and

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/developing-strategic-and-action-plans>

National Association for Voluntary and Community Action

This link from NACVA provides instructions and print out resources for carrying out a community skills audit, which can be adapted to your needs.

www.navca.org.uk/services/learningopps/skild/tools/skillsaudits

The Community Development Foundation

This document from the CDF gives a step by step guide to running a community visioning event

www.cdf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/5-steps-to-community-visioning-final.doc

The Media Trust

The trust works to build effective voluntary and community sector communications through a range of partnerships, projects and services including media training, a film and TV production unit, our digital TV station Community Channel, Media Matching and Youth Mentoring. Wide ranging programme of media and communications training events throughout the UK.

www.mediatrust.org

Funding and sustainability

In-kind direct

In Kind Direct re-distributes new goods donated by some of Britain's best-known manufacturers and retailers to hundreds of voluntary organisations working at home and abroad.

www.inkinddirect.org

Sustainable funding project

The Sustainable Funding Project encourages and enables voluntary and community organisations to explore and exploit a full range of funding and financing options to develop a sustainable funding mix.

www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sfp

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