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.

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

The 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 Cooperatives UK which aims to help enterprises not only deal with conflict when it arises but also avoid unnecessary conflict.
www.uk.coop/fromconflict2co-operation

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.
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/skill/tools/skillaudits

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