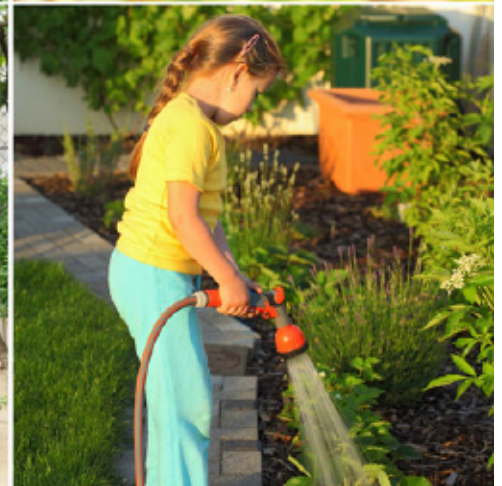


Growing Communities

A Citywide Strategy for Belfast
2012 – 2022



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Foreword

As Chair of Belfast City Council's Parks and Leisure Committee, I am delighted to be able to present this Growing Communities Strategy to the people of Belfast. Community growing is not new to the city, and areas within Belfast's parks were provided to residents as allotments as far back as World War 1. However, there is a newfound public awareness of a range of issues, from health and wellbeing to the environment, coupled with an increasing recognition of the potential of community growing to positively contribute to these issues.

The challenge to the council and its partners is to ensure that there are adequate means in place to allow all people in Belfast the opportunity to benefit from growing activities throughout their lives. The strategy aims to meet that challenge by providing a basis for enhancing current provision, developing further sites for community use, and supporting new and varied approaches to growing which meet the needs of the widest possible range of groups and individuals across the city.

In addition, under Active Belfast the strategy represents the commitment of Belfast City Council, the Public Health Agency and the Belfast Strategic Partnership to working together to ensure continued investment in community growing as a key contribution to the sustainable prosperity of the city of Belfast. I would like to take this opportunity to thank and congratulate all those who have contributed to the development of the Growing Communities Strategy.



Councillor Gerard McCabe
Chair, Belfast City Council Parks and Leisure Committee

1. Executive summary

Background

While urban cultivation of plants has a long history, including traditional allotments and home vegetable plots, there has been a renewed interest in community growing. This reflects developing public awareness of health, environmental and food security issues, which has led to the modern, often community-focused approaches such as community gardens and garden sharing.

Recognition of this by Belfast City Council, Belfast Healthy Cities, the Public Health Agency and Belfast Health Development Unit under Active Belfast, has led to the development of the Growing Communities Strategy which aims to ensure that all parts of the community in Belfast have the opportunity to participate in and experience the benefits of growing.

Strategy development

Following establishment in September 2011 of a steering group drawn from the private, community and voluntary, and statutory sectors, a baseline study of current allotment and community garden provision in Belfast was undertaken followed by a series of workshops and consultation with local elected representatives. This process led to the development of this Growing Communities Strategy, which has the following vision:

All people in Belfast will have the opportunity for improved health and wellbeing through involvement in growing activities throughout their lifetimes and within their local neighbourhoods

and the following strategic objectives:

- To support healthier lifestyles by providing growing opportunities to people of all ages;
- To support and develop communities by building and encouraging ownership of and pride in the city's growing spaces;
- To work to support environmental sustainability by ensuring that growing spaces and activities contribute positively to the local environment and support the attainment of sustainable development targets set for local government;
- To engage the wider community through inclusiveness in the development of shared growing spaces;
- To improve communication and models of management by providing growing communities and allotment holders with timely advice and guidance including site management protocols; and
- To encourage the development of the social economy in local neighbourhoods and suitable training and skills development for employability.

Action

Based on key priorities identified in the strategy, a full action plan has been developed for the coming ten years which, in summary, sets out to:

- Develop information and facilitate communication on growing;
- Link with existing, related programmes;
- Provide financial and other resources as well as practical support for growing;
- Identify and support development of sustainable sites for growing;
- Support new models of delivery and management of community growing; and
- Promote the benefits of growing to all sections of the community.

The effectiveness of the strategy in meeting its aims and objectives will be monitored and reviewed through a range of performance indicators which address both provision of opportunity and impact on participants in growing.

2. Introduction

This draft strategy aims to consider community growing in its widest sense. Aside from private gardens, urban cultivation of fruit, vegetables and flowers has traditionally been in allotments. However, recent years have seen the development of community gardens - areas where people from a community come together to participate in the cultivation of plants. Today growing can take place in many other settings including school gardens, vegetable plots at home, planters and pots on porches and window sills, even on grass verges and roundabouts. In fact, the possibilities for community growing are endless, and as varied as the individuals who take part.

Interest in community growing is increasing, and its benefits for health and wellbeing are widely recognised, as well as its potential to contribute to environmental sustainability and local economic development. The Growing Communities Strategy aims to ensure that there is greater opportunity in Belfast for engagement in growing in all its forms, and that all parts of the community are able to experience the benefits of this involvement.

Development of the Growing Communities Strategy has been led by Belfast City Council, Belfast Healthy Cities, the Public Health Agency and Belfast Health Development Unit. From the beginning, we have engaged with a wide range of local organisations and individuals, representatives of which have formed the steering group that has shaped the development of the strategy – in other words, the strategy is based upon what people who live and work in Belfast have said is important to them, both now and in the future.

Belfast is designated to Phase V of the World Health Organisation's European Healthy Cities Network, the overarching theme of which is health and health equity in all local policies. Belfast City Council and its partners are committed to the Health Equity in All Policies (HEiAP)¹ approach being led by Belfast Healthy Cities partnership. Applying the HEiAP process to the Growing Communities Strategy ensures that we have systematically identified implications of community growing on health inequality, and have addressed these within the strategy.



¹ Belfast Healthy Cities, Equity from the Start: Health Equity in all Policies - Health Lens Approach, June 2011

3. Setting the scene

Urban cultivation of plants by members of the community takes place in a wide variety of settings for a wide variety of reasons. The following describes some approaches to growing – some already practised in Belfast, others representing potential models for future growing in the city.

Allotments

Allotments are plots of land for non-professional gardening which, for a small fee, are made available to individuals, usually by local authorities or private associations. Plots are formed by subdividing an area of land into a few or many parcels generally ranging between 50 and 400 square metres each.

Each is cultivated by an individual person or family who has sole responsibility for maintaining their plot, which may include a shed for tools and shelter. Plot holders are also required to abide by rules or bye-laws established by the local authority or an allotment association.

Belfast currently provides around 170 plots across four sites in the city, for which demand is high (currently, the waiting list is around 285 people).



Belfast City Council's Belmont allotments

Community gardens

Generally, community gardens are urban areas where people from the local community come together to participate in growing. There is no standard model of community garden, and their purpose can vary widely from recreation to market gardening. Activities beyond food production are common, and many gardens perform a social or educational function as well – either informally or through community development programmes. In the United Kingdom, community gardens are usually viewed as distinct from allotments in that gardens are run on a communal basis, although plots within gardens may be allocated to individuals or groups depending on the purpose of the garden. The many purposes and benefits of community gardens include:

Health and wellbeing – providing a form of physical activity, access to nutritious fresh food, and peace and relaxation. For example, specially designed facilities such as sensory gardens may be established for therapeutic reasons, to meet the needs of those with physical disabilities and learning difficulties.

Social – performing a role in community development, building community capacity and increasing social cohesion. For example, gardens may be established with the primary aim of breaking down barriers between different cultural groups.

Food and economic security – providing access to inexpensive, locally grown, healthy food. In some cases, gardens are established with the specific aim of addressing food security issues in disadvantaged areas, or as community enterprises selling produce for profit.

Education and skills development – to create opportunities for learning across a wide range of areas including plant cultivation, social and management skills.

Sustainable land use – protecting and developing publicly accessible urban green spaces often utilising derelict land.



Wheelchair-friendly planters at Belfast City Council's Musgrave Park.



Suffolk Community Garden, Belfast – a peace and reconciliation project supported by the Peace III Programme (see page 15)

Growing around town

While much growing is carried out in clearly defined, pre-determined areas such as community gardens, there may be scope for less formal activity, and there are many examples, both official and unofficial, of using smaller, 'spare' spaces in towns and cities for community growing.

The term guerrilla gardening (generally referring to gardening on another person's land without permission) was coined in the 1970s, although the activity was recognised long before this. It covers a wide range of motivations, from horticultural to political, and involves taking over land abandoned or neglected by its owner. Examples in the UK include organised groups illicitly 'reclaiming' neglected green spaces, beds etc, and planting flowers, fruit and vegetables.

Whilst normally outside the law, some aspects of this practice have become accepted, gaining the support of public bodies and private companies who allow use of their land, and attracting considerable media interest. With appropriate support and management, verges, roundabouts, company car parks, public flower beds, river banks, tow paths and vacant lots all provide potential for community growing.



Herbs planted in pots at Todmorden Railway Station, West Yorks (courtesy of Incredible Edible)



Potatoes growing by a car park

Growing at home

The possibilities for growing at home are endless, and most homes in Belfast will probably have at least an indoor potted plant. Whilst not everyone will have the space, money or motivation to, for example, cultivate a large vegetable patch or build a greenhouse, there may be an opportunity to dig a small bed, build a planter or fill a container for the window sill.

To encourage people, it will be vital to communicate the key benefits of growing at home, whether from exercise working in the garden, healthy home grown fruit and vegetables, or social interaction



Vegetable competition at Belfast City Council's Garden Gourmet event

through clubs, other groups or neighbours. Home gardening support projects may provide people with assistance and resources for growing at home - in Portland, Oregon, for example, the Home Gardening Project Foundation² assists disadvantaged individuals by providing raised vegetable beds and support and advice, to ensure access to healthy food.



The possibilities for growing at home.

Garden sharing

Garden sharing refers to arrangements wherein landowners allow others access to their gardens or other suitable space to grow food. Ranging from informal relationships between neighbours to web-based schemes to match owners with growers,

garden sharing provides an opportunity to satisfy demand when waiting lists for local allotments or community gardens are long. In the UK, schemes such as Landshare³ and yours2share⁴ have been successful in meeting community needs.

²The Home Gardening Project Foundation (<http://www.jeffnet.org/~hgpf/>)

³Landshare (<http://www.landshare.net/>)

⁴Yours2share (<http://www.yours2share.com/>)

4. Strategic context

The Growing Communities Strategy relates both directly and indirectly to a wide range of European, central and local government policies and strategies including those shown below.



EU

- EU Sixth Environment Action Programme
- EU Sustainable Development Strategy



National

- Marmot Review – Fair Society, Healthy Lives



Regional

- Allotments Act (Northern Ireland) 1932
- Draft Programme for Government 2011-2015
- Draft Revised Regional Development Strategy 2025
- Sustainable Development Strategy
- Sustainable Development Implementation Plan 2011-14
- Statutory Sustainable Development Duty
- Statutory Biodiversity Duty
- PPS8 - Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation
- Public Health Strategy
- A Fitter Future for All - Obesity Prevention Framework for Northern Ireland 2011-2021

Local

- Belfast Strategic Partnership - Framework for Action to Address Life Inequalities
- Belfast City Council - Draft Investment Programme 2012-2015

A description of each of the above is provided in Appendix 1, with a summary of the relationship to the Growing Communities Strategy, to illustrate the context in which the strategy has been developed.

5. Where are we now

Process

The process of developing a strategy for community growing formally began in March 2011 when Belfast City Council, Belfast Healthy Cities, the Public Health Agency and Belfast Health Development Unit in partnership delivered a community gardens and allotments seminar, to consider opportunities for working with the community in developing future provision in the city.

Following this, the following key activities have taken place:

- In September 2011, a **steering group** of 40 representatives drawn from the private, community and voluntary, and statutory sectors was established to shape the development of a strategy for future community growing provision in Belfast;
- In December 2011, an independent **baseline study** (below) was completed, which looked at current allotment and community garden provision in Belfast, and made recommendations for future action; and
- From September 2011 to March 2012, the steering group undertook a series of **workshops** which, alongside the outcomes of the baseline study and consultation with local elected representatives, have informed the development of the draft Growing Communities Strategy.

Baseline study

A baseline study was commissioned by Belfast City Council and undertaken by Sustainable NI, in order to inform the development of a community gardens and allotments vision and strategy for the city. In summary, the study included the following:

- Research into the development of community gardens and allotments locally, regionally, nationally and internationally;
- A baseline analysis of community gardens and allotments provision within Belfast; and
- Initial consultation with a range of stakeholders in Belfast, including current allotment or community garden users and interested community and voluntary sector organisations.

The executive summary of Sustainable NI's report on the study - *GROW YOUR OWN – A Review of Allotment Provision, Community Gardens and Demand for 'Grow Your Own' Initiatives within Belfast* - is provided at Appendix 2.



Full details of the study's findings are included in the report. In summary however, the study identifies that there is considerable interest in the development of a strategy for Belfast and makes a range of recommendations for consideration in the context of a new city-wide approach. These can be separated into recommendations for allotments, for the ongoing management of community gardens, and for alternative ways of developing participation in community growing activities.

The recommendations have been fully taken into consideration in developing this draft strategy, and will be further taken into account in the delivery of actions resulting from implementation of the strategy.

Where do we go from here?

The diagram below illustrates the stage we are at currently in developing the Growing Communities Strategy and summarises the planned next steps, as discussed in the following chapters.



6. What we aim to achieve

Vision

It is the vision of Belfast City Council and its partners that, through implementation of the Growing Communities Strategy:

All people in Belfast will have the opportunity for improved health and wellbeing through involvement in growing activities throughout their lifetimes and within their local neighbourhoods.

The following diagram summarises ways in which we envisage that this lifelong engagement in community growing will be realised.



We are committed to ensuring lifelong engagement for all – through, wherever possible, encouraging and providing guidance, resources and opportunities for participation in growing for all ages.

Key priorities

We recognise that in order to ensure effective provision which meets the vision stated above, commitment is required from all those involved in implementing the Growing Communities Strategy.

Through the work undertaken to develop this strategy, a number of key priorities have been identified. The following section outlines these, highlights key health

equity considerations identified through the HEiAP approach, and sets out our commitment to addressing each key priority.

1. Supporting healthier lifestyles

Active lifestyles – regular participation in physical activity including gardening has direct health benefits including improved fitness levels, reduced overall mortality, reduced risk of death from cardiovascular disease, reduced high blood pressure, reduced risk of colon cancer, reduced obesity levels, and reduced risk of developing type II diabetes. Physical activity also provides mental health benefits such as improved mood and improved health-related quality of life, and

there is also evidence of mental health benefits from more passive use of gardens, through social interaction, relaxation and stress reduction.

Case study - Green Gym®

An emerging method of encouraging physical activity in the UK is the Green Gym® – run by The Conservation Volunteers as a way of integrating health promotion and the natural environment. Green Gyms® allow people to get outdoors and take part in environmental conservation and improvement of the local surroundings. Experienced leaders guide participants through a range of practical projects, giving them the opportunity to tackle physical jobs in the outdoors. Potential benefits of such activities include improving strength and stamina, boosting practical skills and confidence, and improving local green spaces.

Diet - ‘Grow your own’ can give people the opportunity to access and benefit from fresh, organic, local, seasonal (and inexpensive) vegetables. Increasing evidence of the health benefits of fruit and vegetable consumption have emerged in recent years, and encouraging children from an early age to eat fresh fruit and vegetables has been shown to help them establish healthy choices and improve their long term health – potentially enhanced by active engagement in growing activities.

Green space - access to green space provides important health benefits for the local community, with evidence indicating that those living close to green space are more likely to be physically active, for example through opportunities for exercise and free play.

Active travel - locating community gardens close to public transport networks or within the local community can have a positive impact on health by encouraging active travel, which can be particularly effective for

tackling obesity and depression. Active travel in the form of walking and cycling are the best way to increase levels of physical activity at a population level, since active travel can be incorporated into daily routines and is therefore relatively easy to sustain. In addition, people walking to or from a community garden or allotments offers important opportunities for social interaction, which can in turn support mental wellbeing.

Health equity considerations

- Associations between green space and stress relief are particularly strongly made by people living with deprivation and disadvantage
- In deprived areas, lack of control over shared space can have a negative impact on mental health
- Those with dementia as well as those with learning difficulties benefit from natural environments such as sensory gardens
- Some findings indicate that people recover faster from surgery if they have a view of nature
- Encouraging children from an early age to eat fresh fruit and vegetables has been shown to help them establish healthy choices and improve their long term health
- The contribution by community gardens and allotments to improve access to inexpensive, healthy food is particularly important for those on lower incomes and limited access to other sources
- Evidence shows that access to green space encourages physical activity and supports the wellbeing of children, particularly in disadvantaged areas
- Older people may be vulnerable due to a lack of footpaths or safe road crossings – which may affect their ability to participate in growing activities

Our commitment – to provide opportunities for all people in Belfast to benefit from community growing activities

2. Empowering communities and building capacity

Social inclusion - community growing and the development of green space is of benefit when tackling social exclusion (ie when people's opportunities to connect with others are limited). A community garden can foster a sense of community among the residents of a neighbourhood, and the presence of shared activity in well-maintained green spaces can offer opportunities for inclusion and connectedness, in turn increasing

perceptions of safety and reducing anti-social behaviour.

Social interaction – skill-based activities, combined with opportunities for social interaction, can help build community capacity and civic pride. Even when growing at home there may be opportunities to develop social networks with those who are keen gardeners, and sharing of produce between neighbours can strengthen relationships.

Case study – The Walkway Community Garden

The Walkway Community Garden project was undertaken in partnership with the Walkway Community Association, Belfast City Council, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department of Regional Development, and was facilitated by Groundwork NI.

The Walkway Community Association in East Belfast found the inspiration for the transformation of a derelict space adjacent to their centre from local man Jim Laird. Jim always believed in the “simple bare necessities of life” and the emotional and physical well-being derived from the environment and the opportunity and ability to relate to and make use of this.

In 2008 the Walkway Community Association negotiated with the Department of Regional Development for the transferral of the area of derelict land to the community for development of a community garden. Groundwork NI supported the local people by providing landscape technical assistance, facilitating a community-led design process, implementing physical regeneration works including preparing contract documents, overseeing tendering, and appointing and managing a contractor, and helping the Walkway Community Association to identify barriers to and opportunities for enhancing community participation in the new garden.

The project demonstrates the value of investing in and developing the capacity of local people in delivering their vision of derelict space and place, to a valuable community resource/asset.



The Walkway Community Garden, including greenhouse, raised beds, seating and decking.

Social capital - community gardens can help build social capital (ie the value and impact that relationships between people create). Community gardening is reported to serve as a 'bridge' between diverse groups, for example, forging relationships between people from different cultures and backgrounds, and addressing conflict.

Case study - Growing Together – PEACE III Gardens

Belfast City Council's Growing Together project began in 2009, supported under the Belfast PEACE III Plan by the European Union's European Regional Development Fund through the PEACE III Programme. The project focused on building three community gardens in areas representing contested space in Belfast, along with a series of events bringing cross-community groups together to work on gardening initiatives, to promote sharing and interaction.

The gardens – at Suffolk and Lenadoon in the west of the city, and Glenbank in the north – were completed in June 2011 and have involved over 100 local residents from a wide range of backgrounds in growing flowers and vegetables, including regular visits by school and summer scheme groups.

In 2010, the Growing Together project was extended to include activities at the council's

newly-developed therapy garden in Musgrave Park in the south of the city, also partly PEACE III-funded. The therapy garden was developed specifically for the needs of local children with physical disabilities and severe learning difficulties, including an innovative, custom-built, wheelchair friendly, raised planter. The project has allowed these children to work with groups from the other gardens, further broadening the opportunity for shared learning and understanding.

In 2012, the Peace Plan provided funding for the Council's Growing Respect project promoting anti-sectarianism and anti-racism in young people. This includes a cross-community sports-based programme in council leisure centres, coupled with intergenerational horticultural activities delivered with participants in the original Growing Together community gardens and beyond.

Skills, knowledge transfer and employment - community growing provides the opportunity to share gardening and horticultural skills. Importantly, this includes sharing of knowledge between older people and younger people – of particular value in ensuring 'traditional' skills are not lost, and supporting positive intergenerational relationships. Employment prospects may be improved by developing transferable skills - many gardens can involve volunteers in administration and management tasks, offering opportunities to hold positions of responsibility and gain experience of running projects.

Health equity considerations

- Developing a sense of pride in residents for their area can significantly support the mental wellbeing of individuals and the wider community
- The degree to which individuals are involved in their community is vital to health and wellbeing
- Well developed community capacity increases the effectiveness of community health interventions
- In deprived areas, lack of control over opportunity for social interaction can have a negative impact on mental health

Our commitment – to empower communities by encouraging ownership of growing spaces in Belfast

3. Environmental sustainability

Biodiversity – the term ‘biodiversity’ refers to the variety of life on earth. Green spaces are crucial for supporting urban biodiversity, providing valuable habitats for a wide range of species including insects and other invertebrates, amphibians and smaller mammals. This includes ‘pollinators’, such as birds, bees and butterflies, that transfer pollen and seeds between plants. This cross-pollination process helps at least 30% of the world’s crops and 90% of wild plants to thrive. Green spaces of all sizes also provide ‘islands’ of habitat, which may be connected by ‘corridors’ such as hedges, verges, and river or canal banks – allowing wildlife to disperse and migrate across the landscape, preventing isolation of species populations. Community growing can also provide the opportunity to grow ‘heritage’ fruit and vegetables, ensuring that varieties from the past are not lost.

Climate change – green spaces can help to deal with climate change and support energy policy goals by contributing to lower energy demand, and reducing carbon emissions. All plants absorb carbon dioxide (as well as absorbing other pollutants affecting local air quality). Trees provide shade and act as natural coolants, thus reducing the need for mechanical cooling. Locally produced fruit and vegetables reduce the impact of machinery and transportation associated with much commercially produced food. Green spaces, including gardens and verges, all contribute to natural drainage, reducing the risk of localised flooding.

Case study - GIY Ireland

GIY (Grow it Yourself)’s vision is for a healthier, more sustainable and more connected world where people grow their own food.

Founded in Ireland by Michael Kelly in 2009 there are now over 12,000 people involved and over 100 GIY groups. The organisation started in Australia in 2010 and launched in the UK in May 2012.

GIY recognises that the way the food chain currently operates has implications for our health, community, the environment, the economy and

jobs. Local supermarket shelves are full of imports of highly-processed, unseasonal produce - broccoli from Kenya, mangetout from Senegal, carrots from Guatemala and so on.

GIY encourages people to grow their own vegetables, and transform the food chain and bring some common sense back in to our relationship with food. This is achieved by bringing people together in community groups and online to inspire and empower them to grow their own and to help each other by to sharing tips, advice and expertise.

Food security – this has been a key reason for the development of community growing since the earliest recorded allotments in the seventeenth century. Community gardens and allotments can provide those involved with inexpensive, healthy produce. Increasingly, strategic approaches are being taken to the use of community gardening as a means of addressing wider food supply issues in areas of urban deprivation.

Land use – whilst there may be limitations to the amount of urban land available for allotments or community gardens, emerging regional development policy offers opportunities to protect and develop urban green space in Belfast, particularly as commercially less attractive land may be cost-effectively transformed into green

space. However, there is a need to overcome the perception that significant areas of land are required to ‘grow your own’ food. Where limited use of planters, containers and pots may be alternatives to ground planting.

Sustainable travel – effective public transport is vital to minimising the environmental impacts of travel and ensuring people of all social groups and backgrounds can access jobs and services, and participate in social and leisure activities including growing activities. It is important that safe connections on foot, bicycle and public transport are taken into account when siting community gardens.

Health equity considerations

- Creating an attractive environment, for example planting on verges and roundabouts, can boost pride in place and wellbeing
- Land use and planning approaches that support green spaces can underpin improved health and wellbeing
- Effective public transport links are important to ensure access to growing activities, particularly for low-income and less mobile individuals and groups

Our commitment – to ensure growing spaces and activities contribute towards the achievement of sustainable development in the city.

4. Engaging the wider community

The following groups were identified by the Growing Communities steering group as those on which growing has the most impact:

Children and young people - young people are often keen to support and participate in environmentally-related projects and it is important they are given the opportunity and skills necessary to do so. Schools are vital to ensuring children are educated about the growing process, as well as the environmental, ethical and health issues surrounding food. In Northern Ireland

there is currently no formal growing programme being implemented in schools. However, many primary schools in particular have growing spaces on their grounds, and visits to sustainable farms and educational programmes in food procurement and nutrition can also support learning in this area. Community gardening and youth gardening programmes can significantly and positively influence healthy development and lifestyle choices including intake of fruit and vegetables, and in addition provide a source of meaningful activity.

Case study – Eco-Schools at St Patrick’s Primary School, Belfast

Eco-Schools is an international programme guiding schools towards sustainability, administered in Northern Ireland by Tidy NI. The primary aim of Eco-Schools is to combine learning and action to improve the environmental performance of participating schools. St Patrick’s was awarded the prestigious Eco-Schools Green Flag in April 2011 in recognition of their great work.

After an initial litter clean up, the pupils felt that a number of areas in the grounds could do with a makeover. With a little help from parents and The Conservation Volunteers, the children worked their magic on neglected patches of land and created a number of raised beds and growing areas. The school wrote letters to local businesses asking for help and the response was encouraging with donations ranging from gardening tools to plants and seeds. The entire school enjoyed planting a range of fruit, vegetables and flowers, nurturing these from seedlings right up to full grown plants, taking turns to do the weekly gardening and composting. Before long, a good season of fruit and vegetables was ready for harvesting, from potatoes, cabbage and lettuce to beans and herbs.

The school uses its organic produce in the canteen, creating many seasonal and tasty feasts - all grown in the school grounds. Developing young enterprise, they sell the fresh produce to parents and teachers, and now hope to follow in the footsteps of other Eco-Schools in Northern Ireland and set up their very own farm shop.

Tackling the topic of biodiversity in the grounds head on, the school was transformed into a haven for nature and wildlife. Following the success of their market garden, the school decided to turn an area of waste ground into a conservation area. With the help of the council and education and library board, the school designed the new garden and helped build it from scratch complete with pond and picnic tables to give the children the opportunity to enjoy all their hard work.

The whole school community has been involved in the Eco-Schools Programme and its continued success had allowed the children to become ‘greener’ while having fun along the way!

Older people - there are approximately 53,000 older people (60+ years) living in Belfast at present. Whilst there are many benefits to engaging in growing, some older people may feel unable to participate. For example, limited mobility can affect transport options and lead to a fear of falls or trips. Older people should be supported to overcome any barriers or perceived barriers through the provision of accessible services and opportunities for growing in a safe environment.

People with mental health problems - due to its potential mental health benefits, growing can particularly benefit those living with a mental health problem; however many face social exclusion because they do not have equal access to opportunities in society. Fostering social inclusion to enhance quality of life is a driver for public service provision, and many people with mental health problems could benefit from participation in community growing, if provided with appropriate support and access.

People with disabilities - around one in five of the population of Northern Ireland has a disability. People with a disability may face particular barriers to growing, including limited transport options, limited mobility and sensory difficulties. In addition, certain types of supported living schemes may not have gardens or space for growing. Many people with disabilities can participate, with appropriate support, and enjoy the associated benefits.

Disadvantaged or low income groups – not everyone will have the capacity to engage in community gardens or allotments, and growing at home on a small scale, for example in beds or containers, may be a more affordable option for some. In addition to the importance of community gardening as a source of inexpensive, healthy food, formal and informal community gardening

and horticultural volunteering and training opportunities are particularly valuable to unemployed people or those from low income groups. These opportunities can enhance their skills and employability, and can act as a stepping stone to higher education and/or employment.

Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups - BME groups can benefit from growing opportunities in various ways including improved integration with local people along with increased confidence in becoming part of a new community, and improved language and communication skills. However evidence points to low levels of inclusion for these groups who may be disadvantaged due to language barriers. Advocate workers for such groups can encourage participation in community growing opportunities locally.

Case study – Ballysillan Community Garden

The Ballysillan Community allotment project is a partnership between The Conservation Volunteers, the Salvation Army, Belfast City Council and the Ballysillan Allotment Holders Association. In 2010, the Salvation Army contacted The Conservation Volunteers about running a project to engage men from a homeless hostel in the centre of Belfast with activities aimed at improving their physical and mental wellbeing. Following discussions with the council, a section of land within Ballysillan allotments once used as a nursery was made available.

The disused site was heavily overgrown, taking a team of volunteers over six months to clear vegetation and waste to uncover old paths and structures. Following this, extensive work was undertaken to transform the site into a community allotment garden with a series of raised beds for volunteers to grow their own vegetables and

a wildlife garden for education visits from local schools.

Through engagement with the local allotment holders, site visits to other conservation projects and ongoing dialogue, positive relationships were developed to ensure shared learning and creation of a sustainable presence on the site.

Since the project started, The Conservation Volunteers have delivered hundreds of volunteer work days involving over 600 people with the work on the site. Volunteers have come from all different backgrounds including intergenerational, ethnic minority, disability, and young people at risk groups. The project has also become a centre for the delivery of NVQ training and short courses in practical environmental skills with formal training being delivered on site, increasing employability skills within the area.

Health equity considerations

- Providing equal access to opportunities for everyone including vulnerable or disadvantaged groups and communities is important to support participation in growing
- Promoting engagement between groups and communities in growing can improve social interaction and good relations
- People with a disability may face particular problems regarding access to growing opportunities
- Youth gardening opportunities can significantly influence healthy development and lifestyle choices
- Intergenerational activity can provide the opportunity to pass on skills and knowledge as well as improve relations
- Research has shown that, in schools that encourage gardening, children live healthier lives

Our commitment – to engage the wider community in the development of shared growing spaces

5. Communication and management

Communication - it is important that all groups in the community have the opportunity to access information on using sites such as community gardens or allotments or to support activities at home, to allow them to put growing into action. A range of methods including training, publications, websites and social media may be effective in providing people with information, whilst opportunities to learn from others already engaged in growing, for example through practical workshops, may be effective in involving the wider community and strengthening social networks.

Management - management requirements will differ greatly according to the nature and purpose of community growing activities. Arrangements at established allotment sites are likely to require individual

plot holders to take sole responsibility for managing their plots and following local rules set out to ensure adherence to legal requirements, control of weeds and pests, sustainable practices etc. Allotment sites are likely to be overseen by elected management committees whose responsibilities will range from ensuring the overall site is properly maintained to organising events for plot holders and visitors. Management approaches for establishing and maintaining community gardens or other less formal activities are likely to vary. Generally, the establishment of a community garden will take one of two forms. The first is the top-down approach where the local authority (or other agency) leads the process of establishing the garden then invites residents to use it, often handing over management to an appropriate community group. This approach is typical when a garden is established specifically to address particular health and wellbeing or social issues, perhaps as part of a wider programme. The second is the bottom-up approach where the community approaches the local authority to propose a community garden, then, once a site is agreed, takes on design, construction, cultivation and management themselves (with a greater or lesser amount of assistance from the local authority, as required). As much of the work is done by the community, this may minimise the amount of local authority resources required whilst maximising community 'ownership'. Sustaining finances to run a community gardening project can be a challenge, especially from low-income or disadvantaged groups for whom projects may be of particular importance. Sharing knowledge, skills and resources in securing funding across communities, and council support in this area, will play a vital role.

Health equity considerations

- Communication and management approaches which take account of the specific needs of disadvantaged groups will help prevent exclusion from access to the health benefits of growing

Our commitment – to ensure effective communication and encourage and support models of management which contribute to the development of growing opportunities

6. Social economy

Income generation – whilst community gardens and allotments can make a considerable contribution to urban food production, as well as contributing to a range of social issues, some are also able to derive significant income from the sale of produce. Opportunities exist to promote and support the establishment of community-run businesses based on growing activities, which generate funds to provide additional income to disadvantaged groups, with the opportunity for re-investment and further development of projects.

Social enterprise – as well as the possibility of generating income, there is great potential for community gardens in particular to be run as means of addressing social needs. As already outlined, community gardens are able to address a wide range of issues from social inclusion to employability, and offer ideal opportunities for social entrepreneurship. The physical aspect of a community garden can allow a group to present a project proposal with ‘tangible’ outputs that can be easily visualised by potential partners and funders.

Health equity considerations

- Social entrepreneurship presents an opportunity for communities to drive projects which can address local issues including health and wellbeing

Our commitment – to encourage the development of the social economy and improve employability through growing activities



Strategic objectives

Based on our commitments for each of the key priorities set out above, we have set strategic objectives for the Growing Communities Strategy. These are described in the following table:

Key priority areas	Strategic objective	What this will include
Supporting healthier lifestyles	Support healthier lifestyles by providing growing opportunities to people of all ages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing information on the health benefits of growing Linking with existing health and wellbeing programmes Promoting active travel to allotments and community gardens Promoting links with community growing and healthy eating and physical activity Providing support for growing at home Supporting skills development
Empowering communities and building capacity	To support and develop communities by building and encouraging ownership of and pride in the cities growing spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing an information resource for local communities Providing information and practical support for schools Promoting funding opportunities Delivering events to promote growing Facilitating interaction between gardeners Promoting volunteering Supporting skills development
Environmental sustainability	Work to support environmental sustainability by ensuring that growing spaces and activities contribute positively to the local environment and support the attainment of sustainable development targets set for local government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying new, sustainable sites for growing Promoting integration of green space provision in planning Promoting sustainable practices in growing projects
Engaging the wider community	Engage the wider community through inclusiveness in the development of shared growing spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing a stakeholder forum Supporting intergenerational activities Promote benefits to marginalised groups and encourage their inclusion in programmes Reviewing access arrangements at council sites Engaging with the Council's Children and Young Peoples' Forum Promoting projects aimed at low-income groups Providing placement opportunities at council sites
Communication and management	Improve communication and models of management by providing growing communities and allotment holders with timely advice and guidance including site management protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing innovative means of sharing information on growing Supporting new models of management which meet community needs
Social economy	Encourage the development of the social economy in local neighbourhoods and suitable training and skills development for employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying social enterprise opportunities for growing

Effective partnership working

Partnership working and community collaboration has been a fundamental part of the process which has developed this strategy, and will be vital for its future implementation.

The partnership of Belfast City Council, Belfast Healthy Cities, the Public Health Agency and Belfast Health Development Unit will continue as we work to achieve the strategic objectives described above. However, we will rely on wider partnerships to make this happen.

We will undertake to work with partners across Belfast from all sectors – community and voluntary, statutory, private sector, education and beyond, including drawing from the expertise of those already using allotments and community gardens. This collaborative approach will be vital to ensuring the effective development of community growing in the city, and we will encourage and where possible support those involved in partnerships at a local level working on specific growing projects.

7. Action plan

Through the work undertaken to develop this strategy, a set of strategic actions have been agreed, in line with the key priority areas and strategic objectives, as described above. The action plan is provided in Appendix 3.

8. Monitoring and evaluation

The Growing Communities Strategy focuses on six strategic objectives and an action plan covering 28 targeted activities over the next 10 years. In addition, we propose to monitor effectiveness of the strategy through the following performance indicators:

Performance indicator	Proposed data source
Number of allotment plots provided in Belfast	Belfast City Council/non-Council allotment records
Percentage of council land allocated for growing	Belfast City Council data
Average council allotment charges per m2 across Belfast	Belfast City Council financial data
Length of council allotments waiting list relative to total number of plots provided	Belfast City Council allotment user data
Number of community garden facilities in Belfast	Belfast City Council/non-Council community garden records
Number of participants in community gardens	Belfast City Council/non-council community garden user data
Percentage of satisfactory site inspections (council allotments/community gardens)	Belfast City Council inspection records
Perceived health and wellbeing of participants	Pre- and post- participation surveys at selected projects
Number and percentage of people engaged in growing (by group/geographical area)	Belfast City Council data
Number and percentage of people who report benefits of growing	Pre- and post- participation surveys at selected projects
Percentage of government department and statutory agencies' land allocated for growing	Departmental/agency data
Percentage of land allocated for growing/community gardens/allotments within disadvantaged areas	Departmental data
Amount of investment for developing, creating and maintaining land for growing as a percentage of total spend	Departmental data
Amount of investment for supporting people in growing activities	Departmental/Belfast City Council data
Number and percentage of people who feel they are knowledgeable in the area of growing	Pre- and post- participation surveys at selected projects
Number and percentage of people who can access opportunities to growing	Belfast City Council data

Progress against objectives and performance against indicators will be reported on an annual basis, where possible. However, achievement of the overall vision of the strategy will not be evident in the short term, and we propose to undertake a comprehensive strategic review in five years' time to consider how successful the approach taken has been, and to agree further action.

9. Key terms used

Allotment

A plot of land made available for non-professional gardening, formed by subdividing a larger area of land into smaller parcels that are assigned to individuals – either commercially or by local authorities and other agencies.

Community garden

A single area of land cultivated, communally, by a group of people.

Health and wellbeing

A positive physical, social and mental state, requiring not only the absence of disease, pain, discomfort and incapacity, but also requiring that basic needs are met, that individuals have a sense of purpose, and that they feel able to achieve goals and participate in society.

Health equity

A measure of difference or disparity in the quality of health and healthcare across the population, including differences across socio-economic, racial, ethnic or groups.

Social capital

The value of social relations and the role of cooperation in achieving collective or economic results.

Sustainable development

Development which ensures that people today can satisfy their basic needs, whilst making sure that future generations can also look forward to the same quality of life. It normally takes into account three inter-dependent 'pillars' - economy, society and the environment.

Environmental sustainability

A state in which the demands placed on the environment can be met without reducing its capacity to meet people's needs, now and in the future – ie the environmental 'pillar' of sustainable development.

Biodiversity

Biodiversity is the variety of all life on Earth. It includes all species of animals and plants – everything that is alive on our planet.

10. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Strategic context

This table summarises policy related to the Growing Communities Strategy to illustrate the context in which the strategy has been developed.

Strategic objective	What this will include
European	
<p>The European Union's Sixth Environment Action Programme was adopted in 2002, establishing a framework for action on the environment focusing on the following four key thematic priority areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate change; • Nature and biodiversity; • Environment, health and quality of life; and • Natural resources and wastes 	<p>Through adherence to and alignment with relevant regional and local policy, Growing Communities will contribute to EU environmental thematic priorities.</p>
<p>The EU Sustainable Development Strategy aims to identify and develop actions to achieve a continuous long-term improvement of quality of life through the creation of sustainable communities. It sets out objectives and actions for seven key priority challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate change and clean energy; • Sustainable transport; • Sustainable consumption and production; • Conservation and management of natural resources; • Public Health; • Social inclusion, demography and migration; and • Global poverty and sustainable development challenges 	<p>Through adherence to and alignment with relevant regional and local policy, Growing Communities will contribute to EU sustainable development priority challenges.</p>
National	
<p>The Marmot Review – Fair Society, Healthy Lives, which reported on the Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England post-2010, is a key driver of public health policy development. The review proposes a range of policy objectives including to: <i>Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities</i>. Specifically, this includes the following policy recommendations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the availability of good quality open and green spaces across the social gradient, and • Improving the food environment in local areas across the social gradient 	<p>Growing Communities has a significant part to play in developing healthy and sustainable places.</p>

Regional	
The Allotments Act (Northern Ireland) 1932 enables certain local authorities to provide allotments of land.	The Act provides the original framework within which Belfast City Council provides, manages and regulates its allotments.
<p>The Draft Programme for Government 2011-2015 Building a Better Future has been published by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. This sets out a range of priorities including –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Priority 2 - Creating Opportunities, Tackling Disadvantage and Improving Health and Wellbeing; • Priority 3 - Protecting Our People, the Environment and Creating Safer Communities; and • Priority 4 - Building a Strong and Shared Community 	The Growing Communities Strategy will contribute directly to the Northern Ireland Executive's aims across these key priorities.
<p>The Draft Revised Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2025 considers, amongst other things, the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The impacts on population health and wellbeing, the effect of physical places, quality of the living and neighbourhood environment, and access to services and green spaces, and • The potential to support biodiversity by linking existing ecological areas and creating a network of existing green spaces throughout the Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area 	The Growing Communities Strategy has potential to contribute to the RDS with respect to providing access to green spaces and to supporting biodiversity.
<p>Northern Ireland's Sustainable Development Strategy - Everyone's Involved, published in 2010, and the associated Sustainable Development Implementation Plan 2011-14 – Focus on the Future, focus on the following priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building a dynamic innovative economy that delivers the prosperity required to tackle disadvantage and lift communities out of poverty; • Strengthening society so that it is more tolerant, inclusive and stable and permits positive progress in quality of life for everyone; • Driving sustainable, long-term investment in key infrastructure to support economic and social development; • Striking an appropriate balance between the responsible use and protection of natural resources in support of a better quality of life and a better quality environment; • Ensuring reliable, affordable and sustainable energy provision and reducing our carbon footprint; and • Ensuring the existence of a policy environment which supports the overall advancement of sustainable development in and beyond Government 	By addressing a range of environmental, social, and economic factors issues, the Growing Communities Strategy has a key role in meeting Northern Ireland's Sustainable Development aims.

<p>The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2006 places a Statutory Sustainable Development Duty on public bodies, stating that “a public authority must, in exercising its functions, act in a way it considers best calculated to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in Northern Ireland ...”</p>	<p>Work is underway by OFMDFM to formally define the ways in which public authorities (including Belfast City Council and its public sector partners) are expected to enact the Sustainable Development Duty. It is expected that development of the Growing Communities Strategy and the actions which come from this will align with the Duty.</p>
<p>The Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (NI) 2011 places a Statutory Biodiversity Duty on public bodies, stating “It is the duty of every public body, in exercising any functions, to further the conservation of biodiversity so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions”.</p>	<p>The Growing Communities Strategy recognises and takes into account the ways in which community growing can have an impact on biodiversity – ranging from enhancement of habitats to conservation of heritage vegetable varieties.</p>
<p>Planning Policy Statement 8 (PPS8) - Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation sets out the Department of the Environment’s planning policies on open space and the use of land for sport and outdoor recreation. It reflects the Government’s consideration that everyone, particularly children, the elderly and those with disabilities, should have easy access to open space and the opportunity to participate in sport and outdoor recreational pursuits.</p>	<p>PPS8’s definition of open space includes gardens, amenity green space, natural and semi-natural urban green spaces, and allotments – attaching importance to the creation of these.</p>
<p>Following a review of the 2002 Northern Ireland public health strategy Investing for Health, the process is underway for developing a new Public Health Strategy for the coming 10 years. This will -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on improving the overall health and well being of the population whilst aiming to reduce health inequalities; • Focus on those determinants which are most powerful in reducing health inequalities; • Adopt a life-course approach, focusing on effective interventions for key life stages; • Seek to align with and enhance other strategies and government policies to make the best use of available resources. 	<p>It is likely that the new strategy will have a strong focus on building sustainable communities. The Growing Communities Strategy will have a key role to play in this regard.</p>
<p>DHSSPS’s Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022 - A Fitter Future For All has the overarching aim to –</p> <p>Empower the population of Northern Ireland to make healthy choices, reduce the risk of overweight and obesity related diseases and improve health and wellbeing, by creating an environment that supports and promotes a physically active lifestyle and a healthy diet.</p>	<p>The Growing Communities Strategy seeks to address a number of the factors considered to contribute to obesity, including healthy eating and physical activity.</p>

Local

The **Belfast Strategic Partnership** (which includes Belfast City Council, the Public Health Agency and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust) has developed a **Framework for Action to Address Life Inequalities**, identifying a range of key priorities including -

- Addressing mental health and emotional wellbeing;
- Addressing lifelong learning;
- Regenerating living spaces and healthy places; and
- Promoting and providing physical activity opportunities through Active Belfast.

The Growing Communities Strategy will contribute to these priorities by: promoting the benefits and importance of being physically active; developing community skills and knowledge; and providing opportunities for participation in safe, healthy and well maintained places.

Belfast City Council's draft **Investment Programme 2012-2015** sets out a commitment to investing £213m on capital projects, local economic growth, people communities and neighbourhoods, and ensuring value for money.

The Investment Programme commits to the creation of more community gardens and allotments in the city, and the development of a Growing Your Own food programme.

Appendix 2 - GROW YOUR OWN: 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.

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.

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

- Agree a management protocol for all allotments and communicate it through all relevant managers and allotment holders.
- Update allotment rules and management protocols in consultation with existing allotment committees.
- Belfast City Council should develop a Memorandum of Understanding for each allotment setting out what its management role should be.
- The MoU should include a list of responsibilities for allotments holders as well as the protocol for reallocating a site.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

- Survey all large plot holders over 160m² to see if they would want to subdivide their plots to increase the number available.
- Review land use on existing allotments and allocate unused sections to people on the allotment waiting list.
- The Council should have scheduled site inspections that are carried out with a member of each allotment management committee.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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'.
- Alternative options, such as community gardening, should be offered to those on the allotments waiting list.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- Establish a team of Council gardeners that can be used to support community gardens and to help them increase their capacity, knowledge and confidence.
- Work with other Council departments to encourage community gardens to be used as a resource to meet their own departmental objectives.

Key Recommendations – Community Gardens

- Agree a management protocol for community gardens and communicate it through all relevant managers and community gardeners.
- 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.
- 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.
- Investigate a formalised community gardening forum with regular contact between all community gardeners to allow sharing of experiences and potential bulk buying of resources.

Key recommendations – The Allotments and Community Garden Strategy

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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

- BCC should consider available land in city parks for community garden, allotments or community orchards.
- A review of public parks with wider consultation is necessary to ensure active engagement by the Council with all Belfast ratepayers.
- 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.
- 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.

Appendix 3 – Action Plan

Short term = one to three years

Medium term = three to five years

Long term = five to ten years

Supporting healthier lifestyles	Timeframe	Owner
Develop an electronic leaflet on the health benefits of growing for use by the community and health professionals	Short term	Growing Communities steering group
Ensure links with existing health initiatives including health referrals to community gardening projects	Short term	BHDU
Promote active travel to community growing sites	Short term	Belfast City Council/BHDU
Promote and support the development of healthy cooking skills at a community level	Short term	Growing Communities Steering Group
Explore links between outdoor gym activities and community growing sites	Medium term	Belfast City Council/NIHE
Empowering communities and building capacity		
Develop a 'growing' web resource including an online forum	Short term	Belfast City Council
Produce a range of leaflets on 'growing' for distribution to the public	Short term	Belfast City Council
Run an annual event/information day on growing	Ongoing	Belfast City Council/ steering group
Provide guidance and practical support for schools and children interested in growing	Short term	Eco-schools / Belfast City Council
Provide accredited training on 'growing' - four sessions per year across Belfast	Ongoing	The Conservation Volunteers/ Belfast City Council
Provide training to support communities in the self management of sites	Short to medium term	Belfast City Council
Provide information on volunteering opportunities at community growing sites and relevant courses for further skills development for volunteers	Short term	Volunteer Now/Belfast City Council/NICVA/Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership
Provide support to groups who wish to learn about and participate in growing activities	Ongoing	PHA/The Conservation Volunteers
Environmental sustainability	Timeframe	Owner
Identify new areas of land that could be converted to sustainable community growing sites	Short to medium term	Belfast City Council/ Government Depts/ Landowners/PHA
Develop recommendations/guidance for planners to encourage integration of green space in all developments	Short term	Belfast City Council/BHC

Engaging the wider community		
Establish a stakeholder forum to support people in growing	Short term	Belfast City Council
Support supervised intergenerational activity through demonstration projects/activities	Short to medium term	Belfast City Council /BELB/ Eco-Schools
Deliver the SEUPB funded Growing Respect Programme (intergenerational)	Medium term	Belfast City Council
Utilise the expertise of volunteers to develop projects which demonstrate the benefits of growing for mental health and wellbeing	Short term	Belfast City Council/ Growing Communities Steering Group/ Volunteers
Review access arrangements/pathways at allotment sites and community gardens as part of planned maintenance	Short to medium term	Belfast City Council
Engage with representatives from the Children and Young Peoples Forum on the delivery of the strategy	Short to long term	Belfast City Council
Promote existing projects aimed at engaging the wider community	Short to long term	Belfast City Council/The Conservation Volunteers/ Volunteer Now
Promote potential funding sources such as Belfast City Council Good Relations grants for growing activities	Short term	Belfast City Council
Further engage with Belfast City Council's Consultative Forum on the strategy	Short term	Belfast City Council
Communication and management		
Develop starter packs on community gardens/allotments/ home growing	Short to medium term	Belfast City Council/NIHE/The Conservation Volunteers
Promote new models of management to meet community needs	Short to medium term	Belfast City Council
Develop a communications plan for the strategy	Short term	Belfast City Council
Social economy		
Provide web-based information on new or existing council and non-council funding, social enterprise, and employment opportunities which support growing communities	Short term	Belfast City Council

