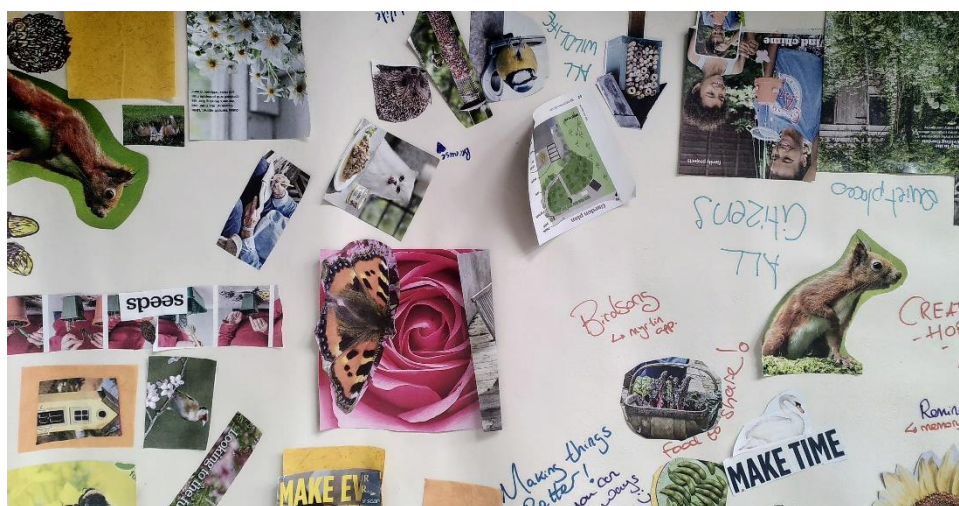


What is needed for a thriving community growing sector in Belfast

By Reclaim the Commons, September 2023



Contents

- 03 About reclaim the commons
- 04 Summary and recommendations
- 05 Introduction and background to this report
- 06 An increased demand for community growing spaces
- 07 Description of community growing in the city
- 07 Sources of support for community growers
- 09 The Belfast garden gathering 2023
- 12 Funding and resources
- 14 Skills and training
- 14 Biodiversity
- 15 Land access and ownership
- 17 Outreach and social justice
- 19 Art and creativity
- 22 Information and communication
- 23 Mapping public space
- 26 Actions, appendix 1
- 28 Actions, appendix 2
- 30 Thank you

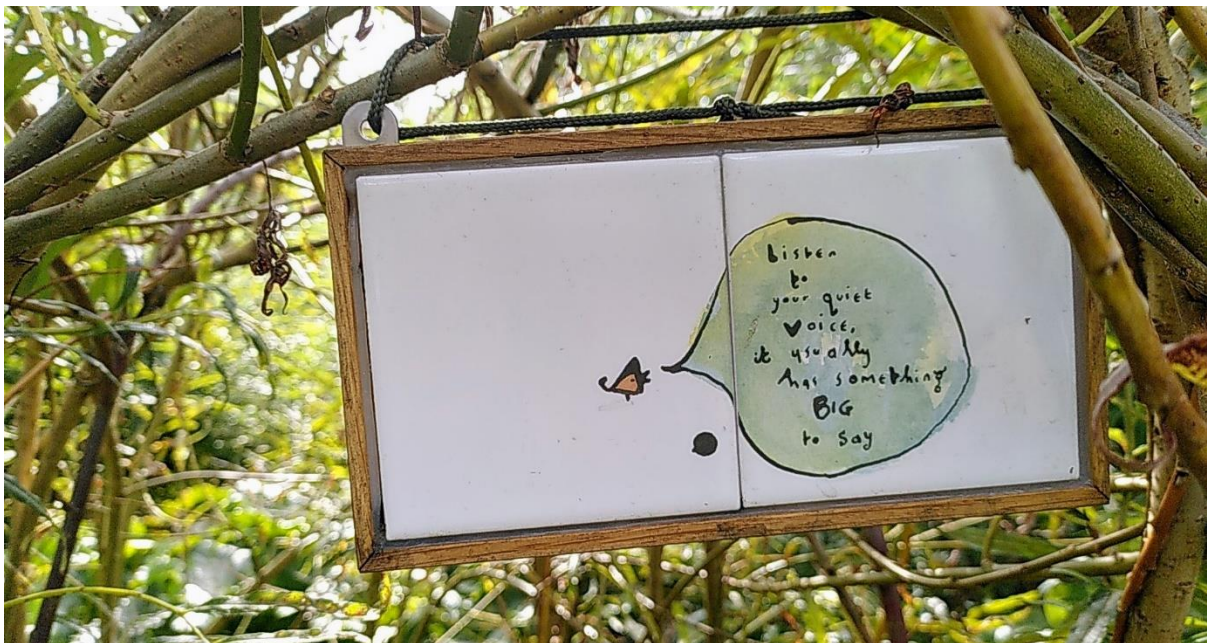
About Reclaim the Commons

Reclaim the Commons is a collective of community growing projects which aims to facilitate communication between residents with an interest in community growing in the Belfast City Council area. You can read more about our members and reach at the back of this report.

We aim to improve communication between people developing these spaces and decision makers, discussing how community groups and individuals are supported in this work, and support and help each other in making positive change for our communities.

In the past 2 years we have visited each other's sites, shared our skills and resources with each other, met with City Councillors to discuss issues of importance to community growing in the city and we made a presentation to the People and Communities Committee. We jointly organised the Belfast Gathering and organised an open day of 11 community growing sites across Belfast. We have taken action to make our gardens more inclusive and diverse and continue to prioritise social justice outcomes in our work. We meet regularly and have a WhatsApp group to support each other and plan future action. We welcome new members, please contact miriam@farmgarden.org.uk for more information.

The current secretariat for the collective is Social Farms & Gardens, who are funded to do this work in their Growing Resilience programme through the National Lottery Community Fund's People and Communities Fund.



Image; Art in Grow Community Garden by Corrina Askin

Summary and Recommendations

This report was written as a collaboration of the Community Gardens involved in the Reclaim the Commons network, a mutual support network of community growing spaces in Belfast. It summarises some of the conversations the network has had over the past 2 years around the needs of community growers in Belfast to help their sites thrive. We hope this message is considered by decision makers when planning future actions to support community growing in the city.

Reclaim the Commons is a recently formed network, and we have been operating with limited resources. We would like to grow and include the voices of more of the community gardens across the city. We would also like the opportunity to work with NGO and public workers to design a strategy for community growing in the city.

We believe this is an urgent time and appropriate support for growing for food biodiversity and health is needed. We believe there is room for much more community growing space in Belfast.

Supportive policy and infrastructure can make this happen. Policy will enable more land and funds to be available. Infrastructure, like a community growing forum, and appropriate information and support will mobilise the city's residents and spread this positive action to every community. A community growing strategy for Belfast can help coordinate efforts across sectors.

The network asks support NGOs, public bodies, and politicians to pay attention to what people are doing to improve their local environments, to value what has been achieved by citizen action, and to continue to consult with us on future developments.

Good communication between all aspects of this sector is a must, and we would welcome and be willing to co-facilitate a community growing forum for Belfast. Further recommendations are made throughout the report, and on page 19-20.

The network is growing, and we welcome new members. If you would like to join in and add your voice, we have regular meetups and would be happy to include you.

We look forward to the next phase of community growing in Belfast.

Introduction and Background to this Report

Community Growing in Belfast has developed over the last 120 years, beginning with allotments provided for workers in an increasingly industrialised and populated city in the early 1900s. Over both world wars, numbers of allotments rose, with land requisitioned from City Parks, with allotment numbers falling again between the wars. In recent times since 2000, we have seen a rise in community gardens in the city. (A detailed history of growing in the City can be found in Appendix 1.)

In 2011 Belfast City Council (BCC) commissioned [a survey](#) into demand for community growing in Belfast, which provides a snapshot of activity in the city at that time. A [consultation seminar](#) also happened in 2011. In 2012 Belfast City Council published a [draft Growing Communities strategy](#) for the city. A list of community gardens in the city in 2012 can be found [here](#), showing a spread across the city, but with more provision in the inner city in South and East Belfast.

Belfast City Council provided support for community gardens, with Community Outreach officers sourcing compost and support, organising in-kind contributions, signposting to funding opportunities and Conservation Volunteers providing horticultural training and running gardening sessions. This work provided sites across the city with advanced infrastructure. Groundwork worked with many communities in this time, for example running a meanwhile garden pilot, which secured several sites across the city, some of which are still running, including Shankill Community Garden and Connswater Community Garden.

Belfast residents have also independently embraced community growing in its many forms to meet their social, environmental and wellbeing needs, inspired by the example of sites in the UK and across Europe. Many churches, schools and charities have used land in their ownership to create spaces for residents to grow. Where no such site existed, residents took over derelict or abandoned land in their vicinity with or without permission and gardened it back into a state of care and health. This includes guerilla gardens and the more recent rise in alleyway gardens, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, following the work of the pioneering Wildflower Alley, established 2015.

This new interest in community growing has been supported by a number of different funding streams - through Council, the Housing Executive and the Public Health Agency, The European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the Border Region of Ireland (Peace III) 2007 - 2013, which provided the financial basis for a number of new community gardens to be set up across Northern Ireland and the Border areas. Since then, the National Lottery Community Fund has provided project and capital funding for many sites, and Live Here Love Here grants (administered by Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful in partnership with local councils) support many gardens.

An increased demand for community growing spaces

Multiple local and global crises have led to an increased interest in community growing in Belfast in recent years. The climate and biodiversity crisis, food insecurity highlighted by supply chain problems during lockdown and due to Brexit, the inequality/cost of living crisis, added to an instinct that becoming more connected with our neighbours, our food and the land can only be good for us in an increasingly disconnected world have led citizens to organise in their neighbourhoods to secure the resources (land, funding, skills and training, and local support) to create spaces to come together and grow. This report is an opportunity for public bodies and support organisations to listen to people working in their communities to hear what it is they need to further their aims and strengthen relationships across the sector.

Social Farms & Gardens (SF&G) currently have records of 66 community gardens and allotment sites in the Belfast City Council area, and estimate there are 100-200 sites, including school and alley gardens. Much of what is achieved by this variety of projects and sites also meets targets and goals set by public bodies responsible for the city. Reclaim the Commons believes this is a key time to coordinate and resource community growing in the city of Belfast.

Despite this activity there does not yet exist a Forum for coordinating Community Growing in the City, and therefore staff and volunteers at individual sites can end up isolated and feel that their voice is not heard, despite the significant contribution they have to make.

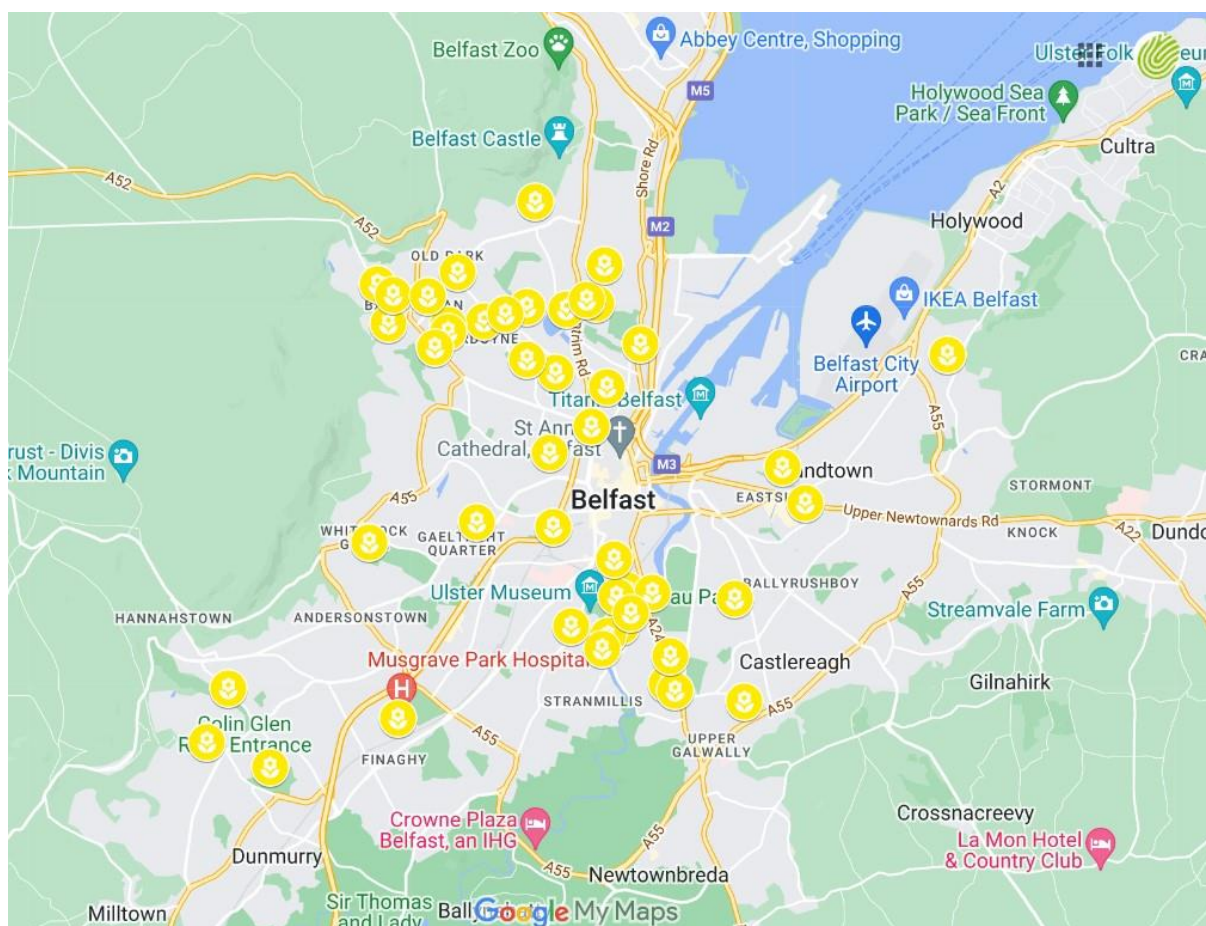


Image: A map of some of the community growing projects in Belfast can be found [here](#).

Description of Community Growing in the City

There are many different types of community growing site across the city, from allotments to gardens, to orchards, to city farms, wildlife gardens, gardens of reflection, guerilla gardens and sites run by public bodies, some sites acres big, and other sites tiny, handkerchief gardens at the end of a street, yet highly productive and colourful. Community growing sites are available across the city, but careful planning should be used to ensure access is fair and focused on areas of the city where residents may not have gardens or access to other greenspace. See below for more on mapping space in the city for growing.

As there are different types of community growing spaces in the city, there are also different organisations involved in managing these spaces. Some are run by funded charities or social enterprises. Some are run by Council, Housing Executive or other public bodies. Some are run by small voluntary organisations with limited funding and no paid staff. Some are run by informal groupings of people, with no constitution, bank account or formal structure. They may however have excellent relationships and communication, and are able to lever resources in from local residents and businesses, and through relationships with other groups and support organisations. This last type of group is sometimes overlooked or undervalued, and people working in this way ought to be recognised for all they accomplish on the basis of local trust and connection to their place.

Sources of support for community growers

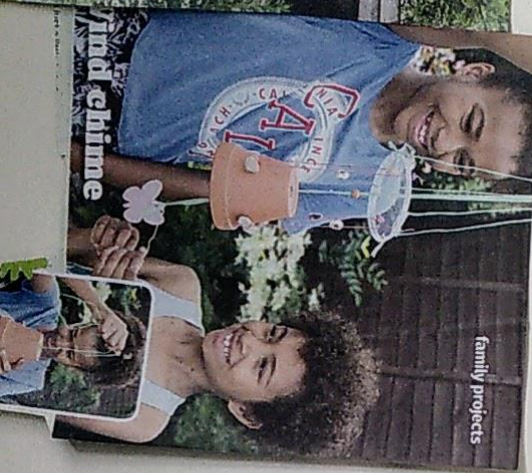
There are many sources of support that communities can access to begin on their community growing journey. The Conservation Volunteers have helped many gardens and entries over the years improve their spaces in a practical way. Development Trusts NI and SF&G work to find routes for community groups to gain access to land. Numerous dedicated council officers have formed relationships with citizens involved and worked to see how best they can help with in-kind support. QUBSU Handy Helpers, and Scout and Guide groups have helped with clean-ups and materials. Some businesses are able to donate ex-stock, for example B&Q. PSNI have contributed with PCSP grants, as have many other funders as mentioned. Social Farms & Gardens work to network community growing groups in mutual support networks (with site visits and regular meetings) and to voice their needs, for example in reports such as this. All this should of course not overshadow that the vast bulk of the work is done by active citizens and CVS staff with limited budgets. These people are multiskilled and willing to sacrifice large amounts of time and energy to make their neighbourhood better. They are the experts on what works and what doesn't for their local area.



Image: Handy Helpers. *Some of the QUB Student Handy Helpers at a work day in Miracle Way.*



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The Belfast Garden Gathering, 2023

This report aims to represent the needs voiced at the Belfast Garden Gathering, hosted by the Reclaim the Commons network, supported by SF&G, in March 2023, as part of the Imagine! festival of politics and ideas. This event was planned in response to a perceived lack of coordinated support for growing in the city. See Appendix 1 for a letter written to Belfast City Council in 2020 calling for a community growing forum for the City. Following on from this, members of the network, consisting of 32 community growing projects in the city, have met with each other and with Belfast City Councillors to discuss policy needs for supporting growing in the city. The minutes of these meetings are available on request.



Image: Flyer used to promote the event.



Image: Gardeners from across the city contributed to the event.

The event at 2 Royal Avenue was well attended, with 60+ people from across the city, representing the community, CVSE and public sectors. Discussions were based around 7 themes:

- Funding and Resources,
- Land Access and Ownership,
- Skills and Training,

- Biodiversity,
- Outreach and Social Justice,
- Art,
- Information and Communication.

These themes were chosen based on the priorities and needs of members of the network. Informal presentations were made in each discussion group using an assets-based approach, that is in each group active community gardeners shared what worked well for them and what skills and information they had acquired in that area. Each discussion group also had a staff member from a support organisation specialising in that area. Discussions were based around the questions: What is already working in this area, and what more is needed: from politicians, from public servants/support organisations and from community growers. The results of these discussions are represented below, and the full notes are available in Appendix 2.

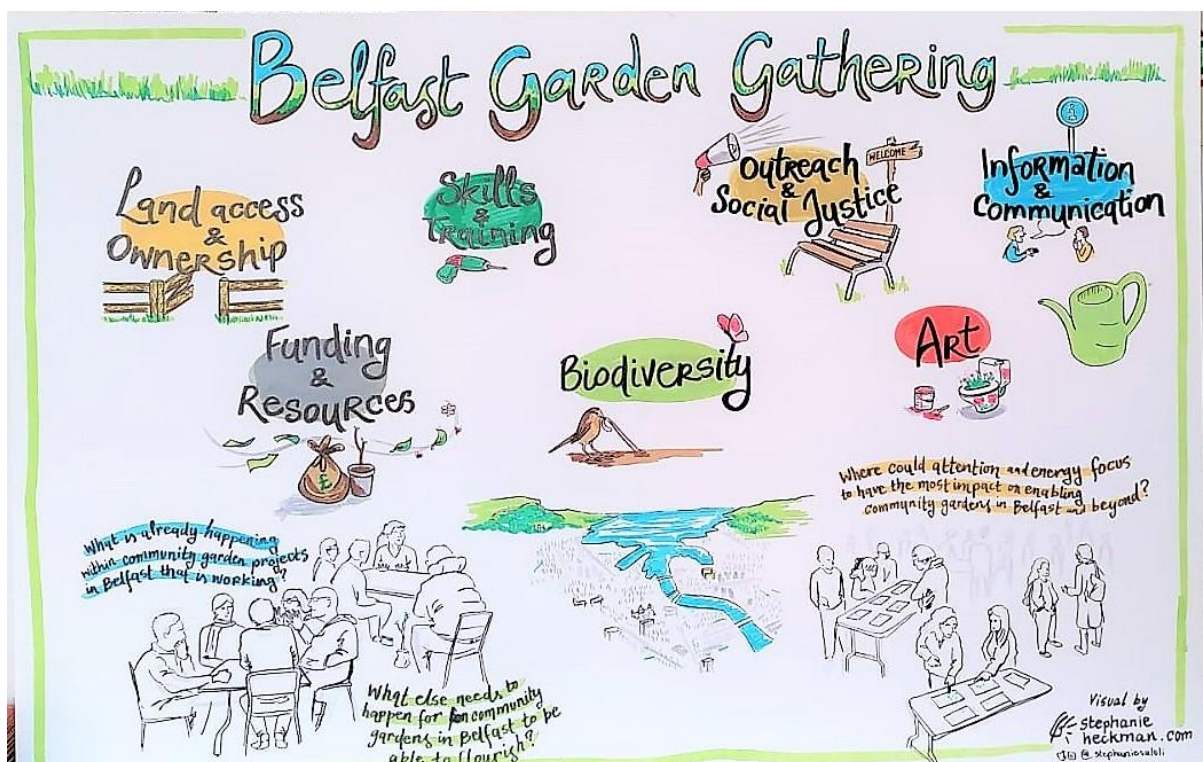


Image: The Belfast Garden Gathering covered a range of topics.

Funding and Resources

Different gardens will have different needs depending on their size, structure, and organisation. Many gardens run free from financial input altogether and operate on donations of plants compost and materials and salvaged materials. Some gardens access small grants and run fundraising events. Others have staff and apply for larger grants and provide services for the wider community beyond their volunteer gardeners. Other gardens again are publicly run or run by larger charities, and have a more stable budget, though in recent years the budgets of all gardens are under threat.

Constituting and gaining a bank account can offer many more opportunities to a group, demonstrating credibility to funders while providing limited liability. However, it is important to recognise the achievements of groups of neighbours, including alleyway gardeners, who are working on an informal or ad hoc basis who could be overly burdened by the administration required. For these groups there are other options- some small grants not requiring a constitution are available; a sponsoring organisation can often be found to partner with the group to provide insurance, or in-kind support or donations of material can be exactly what a group needs. Thinking creatively about how to support these incredibly important projects will give them the best chance to thrive. The important point is that a constituted group does not automatically produce a higher quality of project, neither is it accurate to assume that a more informal approach does not have benefits.

After initial capital expenditure (shed, paths, fencing etc) regular needs/costs for smaller gardens include compost/manure (a big yearly input), tools plants and seeds, public liability insurance, repairs and catering costs. Garden may run events and training sessions, which will involve facilitator and more catering costs. Some gardens will have costs for staff, employer liability insurance, office costs, and publicity and media.

With any grant available a group must weigh up how much money is available, if it suits their needs, and what the administrative burden of the grant is, which varies widely. Some grants and funders are incredibly useful, others are deemed "not worth applying for" as the work involved in applying for and administering the grant is too much. Grants that are too restrictive in their outcomes or demanding in their application or reporting processes will often fall into this category.

Larger organisations running community gardens welcome larger grants and have the administrative capacity to manage these grants. In these instances, trusting relationships like that practices by the National Lottery allows organisations to be flexible in what they deliver according to the community's needs with proportionate checks and balances. Inclusion of core and staff costs in grants is essential for a healthy community and voluntary sector, and the recent trend of excluding these costs from some grants should be questioned.



Image; TCV staff planting apple trees in planters with materials provided by BCC.

In-kind contributions are often welcome in gardens, as they reduce the administrative burden of applying for and administering grants. These can range from compost donations, donations of wood or old park furniture, donations of old bedding plants (which can sometimes be cared for and sold on to the public as a source of income for the garden), waste items like paint, to corporate work volunteering days and practical support from council parks staff with tasks like grass cutting and fencing. Public bodies could think outside the box to find ways to support communities to access resources. Growing hubs in key locations in the city (possibly North South East and West, possibly on Council owned premises) could be identified and used to store and distribute resources and training opportunities. Tool libraries, Repair Cafes, seed saving networks and training on composting and upcycling are all ways to help residents to make the most of what we have. Some councils give away free excess/old planters, bedding plants, bulbs, benches, paint and other left-over materials to community groups. The current BCC compost giveaway scheme to community groups is incredibly popular, often oversubscribed, and builds good relations between communities and council.

Other countries in the UK have legislation to support more resources given to supporting community growing. Can councils and public bodies achieve more support for community growing without supportive legislations?

Skills and Training

Communities are made up of lots of amazing people with different talents, skills and abilities. Training should be provided in an accessible and non-overwhelming way, taking account of the many learning styles. Practical face to face training with resources suits most people (rather than online or only paper resources): “Seeing it happen makes it happen”. Learning with others also allows for emotional and relational learning: we can learn how to carry out activities in a group (dividing up tasks etc), and everyone learning from each other, rather than just receiving one-way information from the trainer. Support from Belfast City council staff, especially the outreach officers is very welcome and should be further supported, as demand for their time is high.



Image: Garden volunteers from a number of gardens helped to build this clay oven, learning something about the process as they did.

We can envisage the creation of fully funded hubs to build central, physical support enabling training access, and information on materials. In the meantime, databases on trainers will help projects and trainers. Practical permaculture training and basic horticulture skills training should be provided for as many residents as possible.

Support for a network of gardens could be helpful as among other things it would allow for groups to share skills between each other.

Biodiversity

Community gardens in Belfast have found that biodiversity is supported by community gardens and school green spaces increasing habitats and providing food and shelter for a variety of wildlife. We believe that more community gardens in the urban area will provide more opportunities to introduce people to nature. Role models for young people like Aaron Kelly, Rosalind Skillen, Dara McNulty are doing a great job, and it would be great to encourage more role models to become active like this.

Education is needed to help us bring about a culture shift for biodiversity. To bring about a better understanding of the environments which improve biodiversity, we need to increase information and outreach to all levels of education for children and adults. We need to change mindsets about the value of tidy gardens: shifting perceptions from ‘Weeds’ to ‘Native Pioneer Plants’.

We also need to promote the physical and mental health benefits of nature and biodiversity more, so that it is central to policy decisions.

Community gardens engaging in biodiversity education need more coordination between projects, to help each other find ways to introduce people to nature projects, and get more people involved to make projects more sustainable.



Image: Wildlife pond in Eglantine Community Garden.

Land Access and Ownership

Once a community group has decided to grow, they identify where this will happen. Groups occasionally work in a patchwork of sites or grow in their own private gardens and support each other, or find other models, but most groups want a piece of commonly held land that they can share and manage. This could be an acre of land or 25 sqm, and it is only by the community group talking and finding out what is available that the right match will be made. Often a smaller piece of land that is closer to where people are or has better access and amenities will be preferable to a larger more inaccessible site. Other considerations include biodiversity concerns, contamination, site security and suitability for growing (slope, drainage, soil depth etc). Most challenges can be overcome, and few sites will be exactly what a group wants, so all considerations should be weighed up and discussed by the group in relation to their skills and capacity. Where necessary, help can be enlisted.

Once a suitable site is identified the group will identify the owner and negotiate a usage agreement (or, if the owner is unknown or absentee, to weigh up the benefits of guerrilla gardening). Longer leases or licenses are preferable, especially if a group plans to invest in infrastructure. Peppercorn rents are almost always the best option, as most groups will not make an income from their project, and even those who do (social enterprises and CICs) will

be able to use any surplus to reinvest in the garden to reduce dependence on funding. Any public or third sector landowners should consider peppercorn or affordable rents for community groups using their land, and consider developing a policy which allows for this, taking into account the social good such projects provide, which can align with the aims of the public body or charity landowner. Template leases and guidance for landowners is available from the [Community Land Advisory Service](#).

Strategic support is needed to secure more land for community growing. Community growing should be written into local development plans, corporate and community plans for councils, and strategic documents for other land owning public bodies. Additionally, high level support for alley gardening will unlock the potential of much more land. This support needs to be responsive to the needs of those carrying out community growing, and requires close listening relationships between growers and policy makers.



Image: Residents at the Threes Sisters gardening Community tended a neglected piece of ground to make a productive garden.

To achieve social justice aims, gardens need to be planned to be close to those who need them most. Spatial planning and analysis of deprivation measure and food deserts will help with this. Zoning for community growing will help to protect existing sites. A community growing strategy for the city can bring all of this work together. Groups are encouraged to be creative: don't just use the land under your feet, use walls and roofs too. And if you are unable to complete your project on the land you have, be prepared to move to another site, or find alternative ways to continue.

Planners should be aware of the potential conflict between the need for land for housing, growing and biodiversity. These needs are not mutually exclusive, and well-designed sites will incorporate elements of all three. See for example [this guide](#), and many more from Sustain and SF&G.

Some groups here have been making links with others in the rest of the UK, for example PPR hosted Pam Warhurst from Incredible Edible at a conference in 2022, attendees heard about the legislation in place in England Scotland and Wales to promote and protect Community Growing, and the work being done UK-wide to encourage better access to land and resources.

The Social Farms & Gardens report on a [Benchmark standard for land for community growing](#) is cited as a good standard for public bodies responsible for provision to work to. This gives Councils a framework to develop policy on community growing -how much land and what resources and support is needed. It also includes information on supportive legislation elsewhere in UK and Europe.

Outreach and Social Justice

The problems of poverty, racism, exclusion, mental health crisis and climate breakdown can seem overwhelming. Community gardens in Belfast find it works to start small and learn from mistakes, but to be sure to start and take action, rather than just talk about it; to seek and offer solidarity with others; and to take encouragement from early wins and sharing this.



Image: A Pride celebration at Eden Alley.

These conversations echo the approach taken by many grassroots groups hoping to affect social change to address inequality across the country. The enormity of the task and our own perceived lack of skills can be disempowering and prevent us from taking action. The saying “Ná hAbair é, Déan é!” means “Don’t talk about it, do it!”, and encourages all to get stuck in in practically implementing our values rather than waiting for someone else to take the lead. This will empower people and create a ripple effect.

Community groups have many skills of communicating with local people and making them welcome. Outreach and social justice work involves thoughtfully applying these skills to make sure that marginalised people can access the same services and benefits as people with more advantages. This won’t be achieved overnight and involves building relationships across the sector. It also involves us helping each other, as no one has the answer, but we all hold a part of the puzzle. And the people and organisations we go to for help will be different from the ones we may be used to turning to. But the main thing is to start and find out.

It is important to share stories about what we do and be explicit about why we do it - we are not just meeting for cups of tea, we are changing our communities and our world. We need

opportunities to connect with each other, visit spaces and connect the dots between growing as an act of social justice - food justice, land justice, mental health, climate and biodiversity, racism etc. We achieve this by remaining open to others, and sharing generously -ideas, knowledge, spaces etc.

In order to do all this, we need more resources and more land. We need community growing to be prioritised in planning systems.

Politicians can support us by actively coming out and supporting community growing spaces. They can advocate for community growing on their committees and continue to ask us what we need.

Example of Outreach: Gairdín an Phobail/GROW.

“We provide opportunities for people to engage in activism for social and environmental change, for example through PPR’s Take Back the City land justice campaign, Social Farms and Gardens campaign for improved growing spaces, Black Mountain Rewilding, Anaka Women’s collective & PPR’s Right To Work and anti-racism campaigns.

We know that activism counteracts the effects of stress and combats feelings of helplessness / hopelessness by facilitating meaningful connections and contributions for social change. This can be as ordinary as learning how to grow lettuce alongside a newcomer to North Belfast, or as radical as connecting in with a land justice campaign to occupy & grow on neglected public spaces.”



Image: Gardeners from the Anaka collective at Gairdín an Phobail.

Art and Creativity

Locally specific murals are so valuable, as they tell positive stories of place and people. They help give ownership, and they help people reminisce and think. Art can also change people's behaviour and sense of pride in their place: where people see rubbish they add more rubbish but where they see beauty, colour, and love they want to add more to it!

Art in Community Gardens

In recent years artist Meadhbh McIlgorm has run the project Limin-alley, beginning during the Covid lockdown [in 2021](#), displaying art and commissioning murals as part of the Imagine Belfast festival [in 2023](#). This continues the work of community gardens such as Peas Park in North Belfast, bringing art to reclaimed public spaces in the city.



Image: Egress Alley art, by Laura Nelson, photo Credit Simon Mills.

More Art is needed. The wellbeing value of Arts cannot be underestimated, people can be supported to be creative and gain confidence in their artistic expression. The Arts in general are underfunded and need more support. Artist facilitators should be fairly paid across the board, from more to less experienced workers, everyone should be able to feel secure in their employment. Community Gardens can be a great venue for arts, and a mix of professional and amateur art is perfect. Art can be visual, or in the form of music, storytelling, sculpture etc. Art in nature is valuable, and gardening can be creative and artistic as well.

Community gardens can provide ideal spaces for collaboration in art, which in turn will lead to more joined up thinking and encourage the linking of artistic practice to the day to day life of people in communities.



Image: Some of the Art in Gardens in Belfast. Billboard image by Grace McAllister.

Many of the community projects in Belfast are developing beautiful and locally relevant murals to reflect their community's spirit. In North Belfast Eden Alley in Marsden Gardens have worked with Artist Pearla Mansoor to develop a mural on the themes of climate change, diversity and community. Residents in the Holyland in Belfast had a number of murals commissioned by local and international artists.



Image: Horsey Hill Mural, by Daniella Balmaverde, credit Paddy Duffy



Image: Eden Alley

Information and Communication

A wealth of information and resources exists online on how to set up a community growing project. Signposting to this information is helpful.

Information that is useful to community growers includes funding opportunities, information on training available, information on networking events, horticultural advice and template policies. Contacts for support organisations is also useful. Local case studies and the location and contact details for other community growers in the city and further afield allows community projects to find peer support.

Dedicated roles (potentially within council) to support community growers can facilitate communication and information. Council Outreach officers already carry out much of this work, and could be developed and linked with staff in support organisations and representative community growers to make sure information is joined up. This could form a “Community Growing Forum” for Belfast This is seen as a community development work to support independent community growing projects and link them up with council run ones. These people could also signpost people to information about what funding and resources are available, and also to map community growing activity and communicate this with the public.

The continuation of the network was also deemed a priority, with a programme of regular meetings and site visits. Some ideas were proposed for the structure this could take. The theme for this network is a culture of kindness, sharing and openness within and between groups, challenging ideas of competition, and instead encouraging and supporting each other. This has been found to work and needs to be prioritised in the future.

Another priority for any information and communication work is finding ways to simplify communication and make it more reliable so that it is easy for busy people to access. There can sometimes be too much information, and it needs coordination and rationalisation. This work could be done between the network and BCC/support staff.

Networking and mutual aid

Community gardens everywhere benefit greatly from being kept in touch with other community gardens close to them. A local network serves as an information sharing resource, and also provides a source of mutual support between growers. Some facilitation is required to keep this going, but the involvement of people benefitting from the network in the running of the network is ideal.

Promotion and highlighting the work

Understanding the value of local community gardens requires an understanding of the value of small micro-local projects and providing infrastructure to support them. While large organisations can efficiently provide umbrella support and coordination across a city or country, locally based initiatives have a different role to play, and one does not substitute the other. A resourced and connected community garden with support will be better able to understand and deliver on the needs of the local community, and in turn will be better able to communicate these needs to support organisations and public bodies. The value of smaller projects should not be underestimated or compared to bigger organisations. Decision makers can tend to underestimate what many local rooted projects can achieve when properly supported.

Some community gardens have staff and volunteers who are skilled communicators and know how to best use the media. Some gardens do not have these skills and could use help with communication. Centralised information sources, like maps of gardens, shared open days, or a guide to gardens in the city makes sure that all opportunities are promoted. Support organisations can use their platforms to highlight the good work going on in all projects and can provide media training. Sometimes one or two projects can become known and overused as best practise exemplars, which can exhaust the time of those projects, and neglect to highlight good work elsewhere. Making sure to highlight many projects for their good work is important. Community gardens can also support and promote each other, sharing opportunities and achievements of neighbouring garden projects, promoting community and trust between gardens.

Mapping public space

Mapping tools described below could be combined with information BCC holds through Community Planning to represent currently held mapping information. Further investment could improve this data set to include as comprehensive as possible list of current provision, plus potential sites. Potential sites can be identified from information on publicly held surplus assets, plus crowdsourced information on what land is available/ could be used for community growing.

In 2020 the 9ft in Common project began as an investigation into ownership of and responsibility for alleyways and entries in Belfast. The project produced a [publicly accessible map](#) of adopted and unadopted alleys in Belfast, highlighted the potential for increased growing space in Belfast through alley gardening, and gathered stories of people's experiences of meeting neighbours in the alley and an increased sense of community.

Social Farms & Gardens provides a map of its member gardens in Belfast on their [website](#).

The PPR "[Take Back the City](#)" Map produced in 2020 is a useful resource as it includes layers showing parks and gardens in the city, as well as unused public space and levels of investment and deprivation. Investment in this map could lead to a layer representing community growing opportunities. Spatial representation of this information is especially useful as we are able to compare, for example, population density, access to other green space, etc.

Those with an interest in spatial planning in Belfast will remember the "[Missing City](#)" map of unused space produced by the Forum for Alternative Belfast in 2009. The Ashton Community Trust have also more recently launched the [North Belfast Garden Grid](#), mapping and providing solutions for the large number of problematic and wasted sites in North Belfast.

Reclaim the Commons have begun their own map of gardens in the city which can be found [here](#), and which we would like to develop to be representative of the breadth of activity across the city.

Communication across the city could be improved by a citywide Community Growing Forum, to discuss opportunities and share information.

Open Ormeau Collective's approach to communication.

Open Ormeau collective oversee a network of alley gardens in the Ormeau area. Each alley has at least one main contact, who communicates with the people on their own street, and then attends meetings of the organising committee. This means that organisation is decentralised, and no one person is responsible for all, but all alleys in the area are able to benefit from support and sharing resources. For example, Open Ormeau has constituted, secured funding and offered fruit trees and planter workshops to residents with support from TCV and BCC. People in each street were asked to take responsibility for one tree outside their back door, in an "adopt a tree" style scheme. This meant that the watering and maintenance burden is shared out, rather than one person needing to do it all.

In communicating with residents OO prefers going door to door and leafleting residents, as they find this is more accessible and gets a better response than online communication. There are now 8 alleys in the area with active gardens, and the collective has gone on to organise more positive events and programmes for the area.

This decentralised approach, with a focus on relationship building seems to work well, and work done to coordinate community growing across the city could perhaps use some elements of this approach.



cent
g



scented roses

FIND YOUR
HAPPY
IN



MENTAL
HEALTH



Pollinators



BE PROUD
OF YOUR
AMBITIONS



run your
business over
this



Make a mini meadow in a pot



Actions

Actions for community growers

- Community gardeners want to encourage each other to keep sharing their skills, energy, resources and ideas, as we will all be the richer for it.
- Show up for things, and rest and ask for help when you need to.
- Believe in your voice: be creative and don't be afraid to speak up.
- Ask for support from the network in achieving your aims. Remain open and generous. Vote for politicians who support us.
- Showcase your work and other's work when the opportunity arises.
- We should lobby and educate ourselves on statutory rules and regulations and share our learning.

Actions for Public bodies and support organisations

- There is a role for public bodies and support organisations to provide places, platforms promotion and funding!
- Keep promoting our work and try to show the serious side of it as well as the pretty good news stories. This is important work.
- Belfast City Council could host a community Growing Forum, for garden staff and volunteers and support organisations as well as relevant council and other public servants, to coordinate community growing in the city and increase communication. This could be a subgroup of the current Sustainable Food Place Partnership being established at present.
- Planners can map land and prioritise community growing spaces in new and existing developments: this can be formalised in legislation and planning policy. Mapping land can be done in conjunction with other public landowners and can be done through community planning structures. This mapping can also contribute to a new community growing strategy for the council.
- Belfast City Council could carry out a scoping exercise to map community growing activity in the city (as agreed [at this meeting of Council](#) in June 2022).
- Our experience is that there are many incredibly supportive public servants, who have helped us in our work, and we'd like to see this approach spread throughout all departments of Council, Housing Executive etc. Public bodies can learn to welcome activism rather than fear it and develop collaborative processes that involve advocates and community growers. Community growing activists are a precious resource for the city and have the public good as our aim. We can help government achieve its aims!
- Support organisations can provide opportunities for us to collaborate and network in different arenas: Art, Biodiversity and general Community Growing. It is important we have chances to work together.
- Where possible support more opportunities for adults and children to learn about nature and biodiversity.
- We also need more access to evidence on the value of our work, for example to build the case for more training opportunities.
- Funders in all sectors support community growing and their work is valued and appreciated. We'd like funders to regularly evaluate the way they deliver funding and if it is in the best interest of communities. Explore more innovative and empowering mechanisms for funding e.g., participatory budgeting programmes for growers. Funding processes should be as simple as possible, and funders should question each layer of administration added to a funding process: is it really necessary? Who does it benefit? Is there an easier way to get this information?

- Funding can steer the nature of community growing spaces, for example it can be directed at Health and Wellbeing outcomes, or Environmental outcomes. It can be beneficial for funding for community growing to encourage the multiple benefits of community growing, to recognise the holistic benefits, and to allow communities to identify their own priorities and outcomes, as each project and community will be different.

Actions for Politicians

- Politicians are asked to legislate for community growing: Northern Ireland lacks supportive policy and legislation for local food, compared to the rest of the UK and Ireland, and public servants can struggle to support communities without policy and budgets.
- Councils and Government Departments can support targets for community growing provision e.g. the recommendations of the [SF&G Benchmark Report](#). As well as recommendations for provision this includes comparisons of our systems with other countries and considerations on locating provision close to where people live, on procedures for communities looking for land, and provision of support, funding and training.
- On planning committees use your influence to make sure sufficient green space and if possible growing space is made available to new developments: no more food deserts.
- We also ask politicians to keep visiting us in our projects, talking to us and listening to us, and using us. Work together to make Belfast a gardening city, and famous for its productive green spaces.

COMMUNITIES
of all species



Physical health + giving
people purpose

Gardening
love + hope
Art



It's not a weed -
it's a wish!

Weeds are food!

Sun
moon
and
stars



respect
all creatures



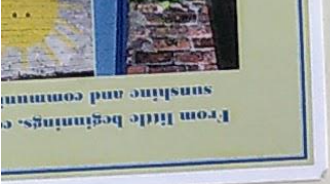
Conversation
Starters

More
Common
LIFE

Food Talk



Plants



Appendix 1

A brief history of Community Growing in Belfast

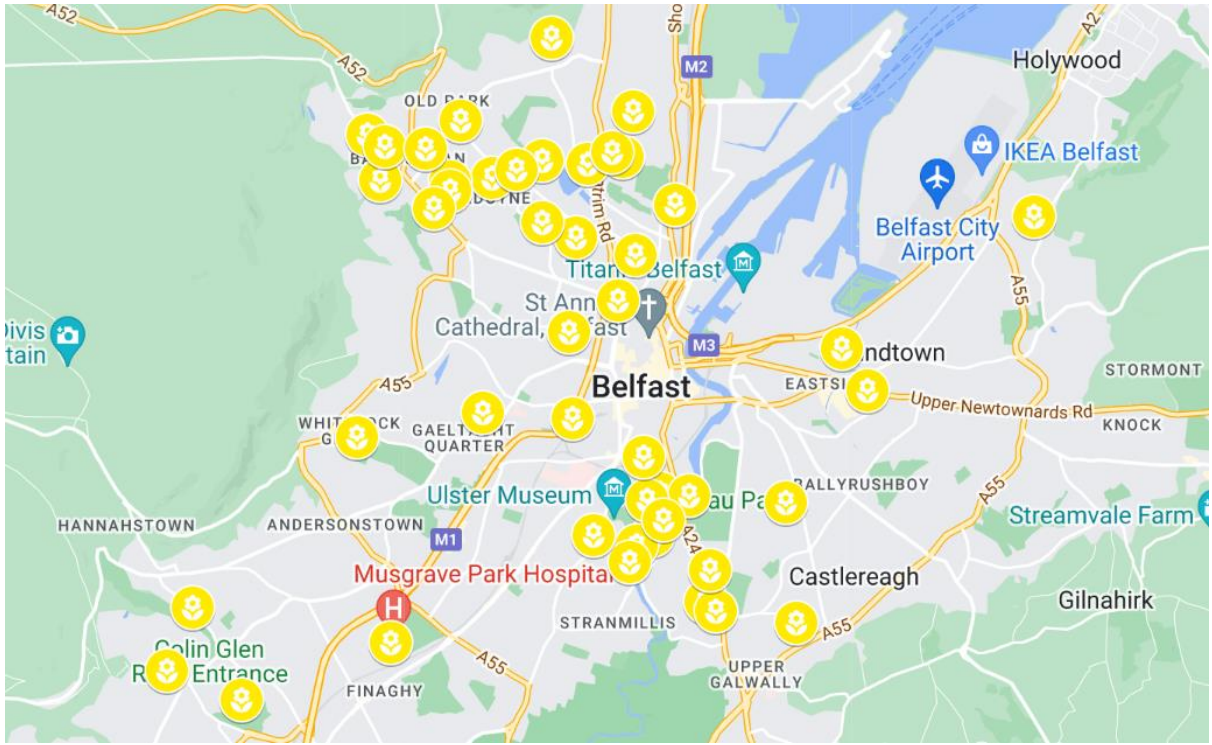
Community Growing has become popular in Belfast over the last century, with allotments initially provided to help residents feed themselves in an increasingly industrialised city with a rising population. The First World War led to a rapid increase in the number of allotments, in the main provided by the Garden Plots Association, not the City Corporation, but in response to the war effort the corporation leased land from the city parks to the Garden Plots Association and provided a lot of advisory and administrative support. For example, in Ormeau Park the Garden Plots association rented out 256 allotments, and in the Falls Park 145 plots were created. By the later part of 1915 more than 700 plots had been established in eight different sites around Belfast. By the start of 1916, 1700 plots were planned, and by September 1916 the success of Belfast Allotments had attracted national attention, being reported in the press, and the Garden Plots Association planned to form branches in all towns in Ulster. Between the wars land requisitioned for allotments was returned to its original function. In Belfast in the 1930s the main allotment areas were Orangefield, the Ardoyne and Ballysillan.

The Second World War again prompted a response across the country to “Dig for Victory”. The Department of Agriculture for Northern Ireland issued reports urging allotmenters and gardeners to “leave no available land vacant of a crop, and make additional sowings of salad crops, to make good the shortage of imported vegetables”. During war land was again requisitioned from City Parks and other public spaces for food growing, establishing new sites at Ballysillan Road, Glenbank, Crumlin Road, Springfield Road, Whiterock Road, Clondara street, Windsor Avenue, Stormont, Westland Road and Shore Road, in addition to other established sites at Woodvale, Alexandra, Musgrave, Falls Park and the low-lying part of Botanic Gardens near the Lagan. A Belfast Allotments Association was formed to give advice to plotters. At the beginning of the war the number of allotments in Northern Ireland was approximately 1,800. By the end of the war the number was measured to be 7,000.

Post-war the use and provision of allotments in Belfast fell, until more recent times. Community gardening has become more popular in the last 20 years in Belfast beginning with a handful of projects in the 2000s, including the Greater Village Regeneration Trust (GVRT) run Blythefield Allotments, established 2005, the CVNI Knockbracken community allotments, Minnowburn Community Garden, established 2007, the East Belfast Mission/Skainos Garden established 2009, and Eglantine Community Garden established 2004. From 2009 into the early 2010s, Belfast City Council (BCC) established community gardens in Suffolk, Lenadoon, Glenbank, Musgrave Park, Finlay Park, Wedderburn Park, Knocknagoney and Falls Park.

Many of these gardens were supported by the Conservation Volunteers with weekly sessions and training. The Council also supported various projects operated by community organisations, including community gardens at Grove Park, Waterworks Park and Ballysillan.

There are now Community gardens all over Belfast, including those involved in drafting this report. Below is a map which can be [accessed here](#), showing some of the gardens in the Reclaim the Commons Network.



Appendix 2

Letter to Chief Executive of Belfast City Council, 2021

E: ni@farmgarden.org.uk

W: farmgarden.org.uk

A: c/o 7 Donegall Street Place, Belfast, County Antrim, BT1 2FN

*Suzanne Wylie
Belfast City Hall,
Belfast,
BT1 5GS*

**FAO: Suzanne Wylie & Belfast City Councillors.
CC Ricky Rice**

24/2/2021

Dear Suzanne,

I'm writing on behalf of Social Farms and Gardens to hopefully begin a conversation about the changing face of community growing, and especially alleyway gardening in Belfast. Social Farms & Gardens has been operational in NI since 2011. In this time, we have seen community growing become recognised in the mainstream as a wholesome activity for individual and community health, and a place for public bodies and active citizens to come together in partnership to serve the community and meet joint aims. We have also had many conversations, with community members, funders, council officers and staff of other support organisations about what makes community growing work. We have built up significant competence and expertise in this sector, and a good rapport with the people involved.

It's encouraging to see the current interest in growing, especially since the beginning of the pandemic, and we hope to see this activity supported as much as possible. The recently announced funding to be available for alleyway gardening and the attention alleyway gardening has been receiving is brilliant, and we feel excited about the potential to really transform the city of Belfast.

It is this potential that has prompted us to write to you all today. We feel that a coordinated and joint approach to providing support to communities to look after their local environment will give them the best chance to succeed.

There are many sources of support that communities can access to begin on their journey. We ourselves have spoken to communities over the years to try to understand how this delicate process of a community coming together to care for a space works and have produced case studies and reports making recommendations on how this can best be supported by public bodies. More recently 9ft in Common has been working on making public information on ownership more accessible, as well as sharing inspiration and ideas on how the space can best be used. The Conservation Volunteers have helped many alleyways over the years improve their spaces in a practical way. Numerous dedicated council officers have formed relationships with citizens involved and worked to see how best they can help with in kind support. QUBSU Handy Helpers, and Scout and Guide groups have helped with clean-ups and materials. Some businesses can donate ex-stock, for example B&Q. PSNI have contributed with PCSP grants, as have many other funders. All this should of course not overshadow that the vast bulk of the work is done by active citizens on their own time and with little recompense. These people are multiskilled and willing to sacrifice large amounts of time and energy to make their neighbourhood better.

With no platitude intended, they are the experts on what works and what doesn't for their local area.

SF&G believe that a round table discussion, possibly leading to a more regular working group, with representatives from these stakeholder groups and interested councillors will provide a robust framework to base future support for communities. SF&G believe that appropriate community development and informational support is equally important as financial support to communities and would commit to contributing to a working group aiming to provide this. We have been working in an intensive way in recent years in building peer to peer networking support to community growing groups and believe our model could be a useful contribution. We would like to work with others so that this information and support can be provided in a coordinated and joined up way, and each stakeholder can play their part.

We are taking this opportunity to offer our services and willingness to cooperate, to build a shared vision for greening our city, and look forward to hearing your thoughts on how we can pool our resources to best support our amazing citizens to make productive use of their alleyways and contribute to the green recovery for Belfast City.

We'd appreciate it if this could be circulated to all city councillors on our behalf, to widen the conversation.

Kind Regards, Miriam Turley

Growing Resilience Project officer

A handwritten signature in grey ink that reads "Miriam Turley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Thank you to;

Reclaim the Commons (Growing Resilience Belfast) members:

North Belfast Childrens Allotment
Urban Nature Connection NI
Three Sisters Community West Belfast
Ardmore Rossmore Community Garden
Rainbow Alley
Open Ormeau Collective
Grow
PeasParkBelfast
Carolan Road Alley Garden
Wildflower Alley
Restore Glandore ATC
Sandhurst Gardens Alley
Miracle Way
Carmel Street Community Garden
Horsey Hill
Northumberland Community Garden
Eden Alley
Eglantine Community Garden
Donegall Pass Community Garden
Rosemount Alley
Musgrave Community Garden
Cliftonville Mens Shed
Raby Street Community Garden
North Belfast Garden Grid
Belfast Indian Community Centre
Gairdín an Phobail ~ حديقة المجتمع
Norrth Belfast Women's Initiative & Support Project
Newington Residents Association
Shankill Womens Centre
Footprints Womens Centre
Forthspring Community Garden
Fourthriver Community Garden
Knockbreda Community Garden
The Larder Community Garden
Holylands Community Garden
Friends of the Field/Botanic Community Garden

FRIENDS OF THE FIELD

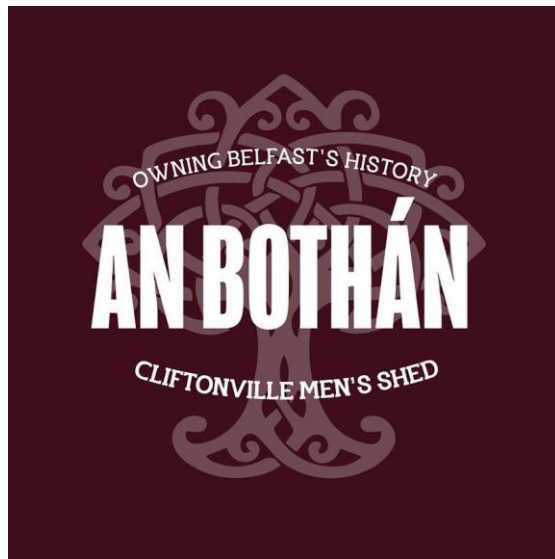
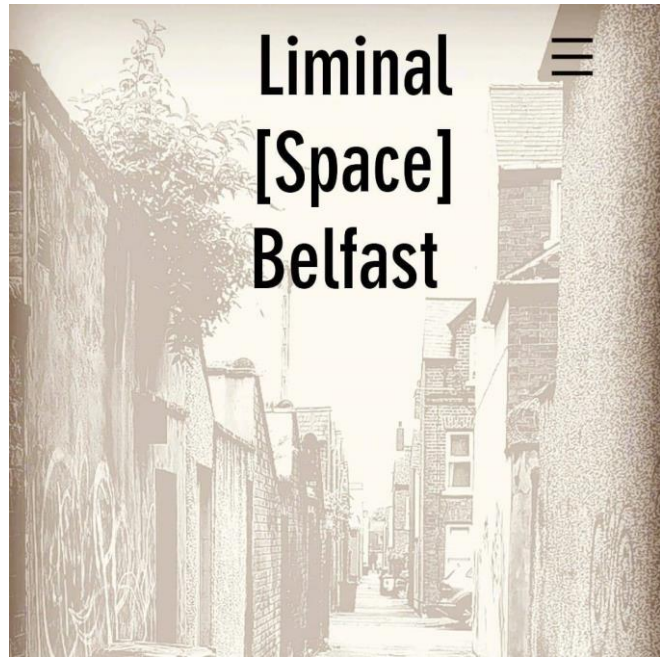


FOOD
COMMUNITY
BIODIVERSITY

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LOWER
BOTANIC
GARDENS
BELFAST





**LIVE
HERE**  **LOVE
HERE**



IM

Social **Farms**
& **Gardens**

