

Growing Back Stronger: the Community Growing Sector and a Healthier, Greener and Fairer Scotland

The community growing sector's experiences of COVID-19, as projects, communities and individuals has differed widely. Projects and partners across Scotland have come together and reached out over the last year to share and discuss our challenges and opportunities, to seek support and guidance. These insights are enlightening both as to the 'state of the sector' and the role it can play in recovery and renewal. Our experiences may have differed, however, many of us share hope and a clear ambition to play a bigger part. Through over 80 voices, from across Scotland we share the reflections and lessons, the adaptations we have made through uncertainty and change, and the various stages of lockdown. *Social Farms & Gardens (Scotland) would like to thank all those involved, including members, partners, and the Community Growing Forum Scotland for their time and commitment, and moving stories of resilience and hope.*

Key Findings:

So what do our experiences tell us about the ‘state of the sector’, its resilience and role in the community.

- Communities and citizens have a heightened and increased appreciation of the power of greenspace, community connection and activities, access to local food, and the grassroots response to the crisis. This has shone a spotlight on the many facets of community growing as an integral local resource.
- The network has responded in a multitude of amazing ways; from providing (when permitted) safe, active spaces for people to garden together, to processing and distributing emergency food and a lot more.
- The network is aware of just how important their work is in supporting people to maintain connections and a level of physical and mental wellbeing. We are Better Outdoors.
- Many projects, people, and communities, want to grow more food, to share what we grow and be a hub to distribute excess food that is available.
- Working more intentionally and positively on taking climate and nature action, connecting the issues and opportunities we have a unique role in engaging a wide range of people in action.
- Sectoral guidance to operate has been well received, though, understandably at times hard to keep up with and interpret; many groups be they staffed or volunteer led, have found this overwhelming at times.
- Those operating in more informal settings rather than statutory services, with associated layers of decision making, have often been more able to respond flexibly and keep their spaces open and continue to serve their communities, in often innovative ways.
- Central to groups ability and success in pivoting their delivery and approach has been developing and working in partnership, locally, regionally and nationally.
- However, not every community has had the chance ‘to grow’. We need equity of access and opportunity.

“If you liken our sector to what happens when you prune something hard, the following spring the shoots and fruits come back even stronger. We can play a strong part in a changed ecosystem and flourish.”

- Many new partnerships have been formed and tested, everyone reported that working in partnership has been central to remaining connected and relevant in this time of crisis.
- Small amounts of flexible grant funding during this period has been enormously useful, however grant funding needs to be more flexible, equitable and accessible to all, and to a wider range of potential applicants. Projects serving their communities spend a disproportionate amount of time on raising and sustaining funds. This impacts considerably on delivery.
- Additionally, if community growing spaces are to play a more coherent role across multiple agendas – including community resilience and empowerment, public health, climate action and green jobs, this requires longer term funding and resource.
- Despite a difficult year the sector remains hopeful for the future, and with adequate support and resource, we are keen, and will be ready, to play a pivotal role in a green recovery.
- **Finally, and perhaps most importantly for a mostly volunteer dependent sector, the people who run and volunteer for projects have demonstrated their resilience and innovation through the pandemic; ambition is high, however many are overstretched, energy and reserves are low, and for community growing to ‘grow back stronger’ we need support, locally and nationally, that does not bring additional burdens, is sector specific, ambitious and aimed at enabling sustainability and growth.**



Growing in the Community: Landscape

Community growing, including community gardens and allotments with community provision, is recognised as a collective and organised way to grow in our community; groups of people from the community coming together to purposefully develop growing sites and organise activities, sharing skills and practical resource. This also provides additional opportunities and benefits: growing and distribution of food, social connections, community services – delivered both informally and formally.

Community gardens, which come in a variety of sizes and models, are proven to foster social empowerment, equity and collective action, and are safe and remarkably cost-effective ways to tackle issues and develop opportunities locally and from the ‘grassroots’. Essentially these gardens, in many cases, can and do act as community hubs, serving as a foundation for a more sustainable and healthy way of living in ways that enhance individual dignity and self-esteem - where people are encouraged to both give and receive. With the lessons we are learning from COVID-19 - shining a light on personal, community and systemic issues and opportunities, these outdoor ‘green hubs’ represent a fundamental shift in how we can design and plan future places and services.

The sector in Scotland is diverse, still largely volunteer led, but with a significant workforce. It is agile and responsive and is growing significantly. We recognise that we are at pivotal point, with increased demand, recognition of the sector’s work and potential, and a supportive policy framework in Scotland. Now is the time to work together to accelerate our development, to be more sustainable, to welcome and support new entrants, and provide more opportunities for more people to engage in a way that best suits them. We believe that community led greenspaces, with their associated benefits, could be available for every community and person in Scotland.

COVID-19: How we grew

Community growing was gaining recognition and developing roots in many communities before C-19. The pandemic has highlighted the urgency of the expanded role we have to play in providing safe outdoor spaces. Despite the huge diversity in the network, from entirely volunteer led growing spaces to groups funded to design and deliver services through nature and greenspace, there were some common themes, issues and opportunities, highlighted below:

- As C19 developed, many projects and sites took the lead in demonstrating how to ask for help and direction to follow restrictions and guidance; adjusting and continuing to operate and provide support and opportunities. Overwhelmingly, evidence from our discussions demonstrated that our sector wants to step up, remain active and connected, comply with restrictions and guidelines and be responsive to when they change.
- Some projects were unsure how the exemptions could allow them to operate; some reduced service more than required to ensure they complied, keeping people active but safe.
- Projects with more complex models, part of or linked to larger organisations, generally found that restarting operations was not easy, with a few layers of permission to seek, and more complex risk assessment processes.

“In the first lockdown, despite it being a busy time for our gardeners, we downed tools and worked in partnership to deliver emergency food supplies as that was priority. Now the priority and focus is safe social connections outdoors, as a trusted delivery partner with the local health partnership and NHS.”

The network has shown its strength, versatility and ability to pivot but not without huge human resource which needs to be acknowledged here. The time, versatility and commitment has been immense, as at times has been the human cost with many consulted being honest about feeling exhausted and stretched thin.

- Some projects have had to close, and remain closed, with people who carry risk responsibilities, including project host organisations and land owners, not realising how the changes needed could address the risk, or have a full sense of the important benefits and opportunities that are being curtailed.
- Others that focus support on vulnerable groups were having to turn people in crisis away, with the decreased space and additional measures forcing sessions to be cancelled.

“How therapeutic can our offer be if we feel stretched, with so much more stuff to think through and implement. As a staff team we are always overstretched and the constant risk assessment has at times been overwhelming.”

- Generally, small grassroots projects were more agile, and the allotment model, with Local Authority or land owner support, was able to continue with relatively minor adjustments.
- Most reported an increased interest in their offer, despite restrictions and temporary closures.

“When the Guidance was lessened, we created our own kind of bubble and our garden had never looked so good. We’ve encouraged the young trainees to take COVID-19 seriously and keep each other safe.”

- As the restrictions continue, coordinators have adapted quickly and continue working to get people on site to follow their lead and practice the new measures. Sites are proving to be useful places for learning the new ways of being together safely.

- Adapting and practicing safely has brought additional work for volunteers and staff, from administration and communication, to cleaning and supervision; and changes to infrastructure including additional tools, shelters, signage, and handwashing.
- Adaptations, in practice, need to be able to be carefully implemented to accommodate people who are more vulnerable to the officiousness of the restrictions and used to a more relaxed setting, so as to ensure that they can still feel welcome and able to participate. This is an ongoing challenge to work on together.
- Projects unable to operate on site reset their future plans, and many connected to volunteers, people and partners online, including supporting new digital users to participate, with others finding ways to keep growing for the community. This has been easier for staffed groups.
- Many groups' success has been working in partnership with existing partners and forging new ones through Third Sector Interfaces, with local foodbanks, community centres and local development trusts.
- Many reported of creative ways to maintain connections through online windowsill growing workshops, social distanced distribution of tomato and other plants, delivery of growing kits and associated resources. Current discussion, as we look towards spring 2021, involves similar and more refined mechanisms to *grow together whilst apart*.
- **There has been an increase in demand for groups 'services' as more people have sought connection and an interest in local food.** This drew in requests for volunteering opportunities, however for many projects, connecting to this resource was thwarted by the system, particularly on how volunteers are signposted. Projects offer a lot of different opportunities, not just growing. Welcoming volunteers requires more time for induction and training with the new safer working practices.

“We’ve been doing a whole load of virtual education, and we’ve created new partnerships with new organisations. The last 11 months have been very different but we have embarked on new activities and taken new paths that we would have otherwise never explored.”

The role of local food

Local food- growing, sharing and redistributing has long been a core element and driving force behind the growth of the community growing sector in Scotland. The daily necessity of food unites people of all ages and backgrounds and as such has been a central theme for many groups. Through informal learning, sharing and receiving opportunities community gardens are fundamental in supporting people to practice new approaches to food.

The ‘growing local’ concept has gained more recognition – several members found themselves in a position to respond at local level because of investment or relationships previously developed through food. Other groups developed new relationships with local partners in response to an increase of need for fresh and local food. One group took on the temporary management of an unused garden and grew food at scale for local communities.

“Our response to our rural highland community has been all about food and made possible through food. We’ve had considerable government investment recently to support growing locally and partnerships and initiatives already in place have made us the obvious partner to deliver support through Covid. It’s just a shame that not every community has had this opportunity.”

“ We were all new to growing food at scale and used a rota app to help!”

- Allotments, private and council run, have seen their waiting lists surge, with increase in diversity of applicants, during a period which is also seeing the launch of the statutory Local Authority Food Growing Strategies.
- Projects and sites have been approached by local stakeholders including schools and organisations in health and other sectors, looking to partner and deliver learning and services in an outdoor setting. Some groups have responded, however recognise they will need extra resource to continue this service. Many are not able to take this on.

“The garden was closed during lockdown, so we got ourselves set up and cooked and delivered 1200 meals. We are now setting up a food larder.”

“We have seen a big increase in demand and sale of vegetable plug plants and other products which has generated income and, through providing a much needed service, boosted the confidence of young people on placement at the garden.”



Full Report

Health and Wellbeing

A key theme from all our conversations was the willingness of projects to support positive mental health and wellbeing even during a pandemic, recognising the benefits of bringing people together, when possible, and in the relative safety of being outdoors.

“The disease is not the only thing that kills people, we can offer something that counters isolation and supports positive mental health.”

Community gardens provide opportunities for people to engage in purposeful organised activities that are proven to improve mental wellbeing. They also offer safe spaces to visit. One garden in central Glasgow offered a safe COVID-19 garden space, available for local residents to book and meet up with others outdoors. When it was necessary to close a site, a participant reported improved relationships through connecting online. Smaller groups of volunteers getting together this way had deepened relationships.

“We have an elderly woman in our island community who had become quite isolated at the start of lockdown - she has learnt to use Facebook and is hosting the gardening question and answer sessions from her home and loving it.”

All participants reported that they had reaffirmed, above all else, the importance of their setting for offering the opportunity for social connection.

“ We have all the ingredients in our gardens to improve mental health, and when other agencies have ground to a halt, or meet people over Zoom, in many levels of the Guidance, we could still meet people face to face. We have something we can offer and I think we need to shout about it.”

“The social thing has been hugely important to people- yes we came together to grow food for good causes but we were struck that people just needed the social contact more than anything else.”

“We know of people that have had COVID-19 that have been coming to the allotment as part of their own recovery.”



Full Report

Sustainability and Finance

Last but not least, financial resource. The community sector, often providing essential services with volunteers has both been under more pressure but also has had new funding streams made available. Many core funders have been enormously supportive and flexible, as projects provided new services such as food and seed distribution. This also enabled community growing sites to have the opportunity to reset and engage new people, to be a hub for community connection and wellbeing.

“We are a small community garden and wanted to do more, so we got a bit of funding from a local COVID-19 fund to put in seating, edging and other dementia friendly features. We have hired a young man who is a joiner that had lost his job, and he now has gained other employment locally through word of mouth. So everyone is happy.”

Financial sustainability is an ongoing issue for many projects, with income generation from sales, events and renting space mostly curtailed. Projects that received grants, including those designated for C-19 work, found them useful in the short term. Generally, most funding applicable to the sector is resource heavy to apply for and report on, with many funds perpetuating barriers for communities with less agency and resource, so not equitable.

We will be more sustainable if we can take this opportunity the crisis has given us to engage more people in our communities. We need the confidence to put out our signs and open our doors, bringing in a more diverse range of people, skills and ideas. Supporting those of us, who ourselves need to rejuvenate after this crisis.

“As a volunteer I didn’t come to do all the things I end up doing- governance, fundraising etc.”

“Getting bits of money for capital funds is relatively easy but what our little organization (entirely volunteer led) needs, is someone working across the local authority that will do the funding bits and let us get on with supporting more people in experiencing directly the benefits of gardening.”

“We don’t just want volunteers to garden – we need people to sell stuff, to build things, to do accounts.”

“In our island community, the pandemic has highlighted not just the need to be more financially self-sufficient, but also the importance of food growing and food waste recycling. We are also looking to be more of a major supplier in our community of fruit and vegetables.”

So that is how we have ‘**grown back stronger**’ as a sector at this tumultuous time. We rose to the challenge, when we could, and a light has been shone on our role as an important asset for all types of communities, across Scotland. Planting more seeds to help us grow back stronger will reap many benefits; connecting people to each other and nature and growing the potential for community led action to tackle the other existential issues we all face.

“We see opportunity in this economic crisis, the growing sector should be part of a fairer, greener economic recovery and renewal. Yes, gardens can be therapeutic, and with some thought and demonstration they can also be economic. Presenting opportunities for training, jobs, local food and services.”

Now let’s look forward to how the community growing sector and partners can work together to grow a healthier, greener and fairer Scotland.

