

# AN EVALUATION OF THE GROWING RESILIENCE: DIGGING DEEPER PROJECT 2019-2024



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## Diversity of Growing Spaces



## Community Growing Benefits



## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Overview and Background to the Growing Resilience: Digger Deeper Project<sup>1</sup>

Social Farms & Gardens (SF&G) is a membership-based community development organisation with over 150 member groups and organisations in Northern Ireland (including an expanding number of local Councils) and is part of a wider UK body. Its purpose is working to support the rich diversity of community growing spaces.

*"SF&G at a micro community level captures what community ownership is and what it means in terms of social wellbeing and environmental regeneration, and it focuses attention on the importance of community in the wider 'macro' debate on land reform".<sup>2</sup>*

The ethos of SF&G is to promote 'connectedness' within growing communities, between growing communities and between growing communities and key support agencies and decision makers. This follows the classic social capital model of relationship building: bonding (within groups); bridging (between groups); linking (with decision makers).

*"Bonding refers to connections within mostly homogeneous groups with similar goals (Putnam, 2000). Bridging relationships connect individuals dissimilar in some way (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Linking refers to individuals building relationships with institutions with power to provide access to jobs and resources (Woolcock, 2001)."<sup>3</sup>*

Central to this idea is that a garden, allotment, or other growing space plays a vital role in creating a space where people can gather and form networks. And as the image on the previous page demonstrates, growing spaces can come in many different shapes and sizes.

*"Community gardening creates opportunities for networking, resource sharing, and social support, preserves cultural knowledge, and reinforces collective values."<sup>4</sup>*

Begin a conversation about growing and food and you often end up talking about the village, the street, the town, children and young people, support and care, neighbours, and how to grow a good community.

The story of this project begins in 2016 with one cluster of four growing groups. Following its success, funding was secured for the two-year project (2017-2019) with The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF). Through its work with growing projects and engagement with groups, SF&G had identified the need for greater peer-networking, learning and

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth referred to as the Growing Resilience Project

<sup>2</sup> Development Trusts Northern Ireland

<sup>3</sup> John M. Halstead, Steven C. Deller & Kevin M. Leyden (2022) Social capital and community development: Where do we go from here?, Community Development, 53:1, 92-108, DOI: 10.1080/15575330.2021.1943696 p, 94

<sup>4</sup> Shostak, S., & Guscott, N. (2017). Grounded in the neighborhood, grounded in community: Social capital and health in community gardens. In Food systems and health, 199-222. Emerald publishing Ltd.

collaboration between growing groups to build on skills and resources that community growing groups have acquired.

The Growing Resilience Project (2019-24) supported by TNLCF took on the learnings and the recommendations from the pilot, deepening and extending SF&G's proven practice model of 'peer to peer skill sharing' through establishing a Northern Ireland wide network of growing groups with the ambition of extending the project into 10 new 'geographical' clusters. These were to cover the Council areas of Belfast, Derry & Strabane, Ards & North Down, Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon, Lisburn & Castlereagh, Mid Ulster and Newry, Mourne & Down. Each cluster would have a number of growing groups building on the 5 clusters already established in the pilot phase.

'Themed' clusters would also be organised to address skills, knowledge, experience and build capacity in growing groups with delivery including engaging with Social Farms on common themes of interest and support.

*“The fostering of resilience is critical to protecting and promoting health and wellbeing at both the individual and community level. Resilient communities respond proactively to new or adverse situations, prepare for economic, social and environmental change and deal better with crisis and hardship.”<sup>5</sup>*

At the heart of resilience is relationships and there was no bigger moment to test this out than during the pandemic.

*“Re-neighbouring, forging new and stronger relationships between citizens rather than between citizens and the state or citizens and the market, has been one of the most notable features of the crisis.”<sup>6</sup>*

The Growing Resilience Project was about demonstrating the need to build capacity in land-based community development with a belief that communities that grow, grow resilient communities. SF&G has proven over the last number of years that community development practice that is shaped by an understanding that the wellbeing of people is entangled in the wellbeing of the soil, water and air is a richer and more effective practice and will serve us better as communities as we respond to the emergencies of climate breakdown and environmental degradation.

Many of the diverse growing spaces that SF&G has supported over the last number of years have done this through incorporating these core values and design principles.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/sites/farmgarden.org.uk/files/sfg\\_report - the resilience of the community growing sector in northern ireland 0.pdf](https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/sites/farmgarden.org.uk/files/sfg_report_-_the_resilience_of_the_community_growing_sector_in_northern_ireland_0.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://relationshipsproject.org/understand/the-moment-we-noticed/>



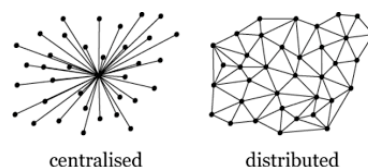
### Equity & Social Justice



### Asset based



### From centralised to distributed networks



centralised

distributed

Attracting a diverse range of participants and intentionally removing barriers to participation.

Beginning with noticing and mobilising existing value and assets in a place.

Involving people working peer-to-peer as equals, creating and producing together.

### Productive activity



Producing tangible things together as human beings.

Land-based community development practice always begins with the assets in a place; working in a way that starts with people and groups recognizing and pooling their gifts, skills and knowledge.

*“But if that’s going to happen, we first need to develop the X-ray vision and imagination that will allow us to see the human gifts that are so often hidden in plain sight. That’s where the ABCD (Asset Based Community Development) approach begins. It then proceeds to strategy and on-the-ground action as people seek to connect with one another, humanize their communities, and democratize their nation.”<sup>7</sup>*

An asset-based lens allows us also to shift from a scarcity mindset that tells us that resources are finite and that there is not enough to go round. This mindset can generate

<sup>7</sup> Cormac Russell, John McKnight, *The Connected Community – Discovering the Health, Wealth and Power of Neighbourhoods*, (2022), p., x

competition and conflict, where groups compete for limited access, power, influence, and resources. We become grasping and distrustful, afraid we'll lose what little we have. We notice what's missing, but not what's present. Shifting to an abundance mindset requires us to declare that:

*"We have what we need. Our creativity produces infinite wealth. We share what we have. You look at a foul heap of rubble and trash and see a children's garden. With an asset based or abundance mindset we give up waiting for rescue, we stop feeling victimised or betrayed and we get to work solving our own problems."*<sup>8</sup>

This report takes an asset-based approach capturing what has been grown over the last four years by the SF&G team with focus on what the next chapter might bring.



**Comber Community Garden on a former Ards & North Down Borough Council Recycling Site**

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<sup>8</sup> Wheatley, M., Walk Out Walk On, 2011, p.121



## 2.Key Findings

### Growing Resilience: Digging Deeper 2019 - 2024

At the heart of resilience is relationships and there was no bigger moment to test this out than during the pandemic. This project understood, embodied and practised that relationships are the 'bottom line' in terms of our wellbeing as people and our ability to feed ourselves and thrive on a living planet.

The project is firmly in the space of land-based community development recognizing that our health and wellbeing as people is interdependent with the wellbeing of the environment our soil, water and air.

It is testament of this purposely small team that SF&G have supported over 96 groups since 2019 in the cycle of support that is different for each place and group.

SF&G has played a vital role in removing obstacles, giving confidence, and bringing people together to be part of a bigger 'whole'. Fostering collaborative networks rather than competition. SF&G have piloted Participatory Budgeting when additional funding was attracted. Growing Resilience Video [A link to our promotional video for Growing Resilience](#)

Participant and wider stakeholder feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

The team has grown its skill set and areas of work providing best practice to the sector in land-based community development using an asset based approach, building networks and supporting groups to make sense of climate breakdown, the pandemic and the cost of living crisis and what they can do from where they are standing and growing, how they can be resilient. COP 26 Film <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tF3pc-mYAjs>

The investment in SF&G NI has allowed them to deepen and broaden the relationships required on the land, with people and with decision makers and to begin shifting the dial. Engaging Local Councils in NI to reimagine possibilities for public land is a significant piece of advocacy. SF&G has subtly engaged local government to consider bigger picture opportunities taking shape in the emergence of community gardens and social farms, adding support for collective ownership. SF&G work co-designing a report on The Case for a Benchmark Standard for Community Growing and Allotment Provision in NI is a significant piece of primary research. Shankhill Women's Centre & GROW NI – Benchmark Report Film [https://player.vimeo.com/video/825464520?h=9c0a822802&badge=0&autoplay=0&player\\_id=0&app\\_id=58479](https://player.vimeo.com/video/825464520?h=9c0a822802&badge=0&autoplay=0&player_id=0&app_id=58479)

The focus on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion has contributed to Community Growing Groups becoming more resilient and relevant to the shifting demographics and needs across many communities.

The Growing Resilience Project has without doubt been value for money for TNLCF and more than met the programme's core priorities. The SF&G team purposely kept itself small to avoid competing with its wider membership with a flexibility that allowed the staff to decrease or increase hours depending on workloads. As a small team, the staff have achieved a formidable amount of work in incredibly challenging times with the project

beginning six months before lockdown. It is also impressive that they levered in another £160,000 in addition to the Lottery grant for specialist areas of work and research.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Process

The evaluation process sought to evidence impact and support the considerations of the longer-term future of the project and the key elements that merit being taken forward in coming years.

The research methodology was informed by a community development perspective, rooted in the qualitative experiences of individual beneficiaries of the project as well as other key stakeholders. The approach was predominantly qualitative but supported by quantitative analysis of feedback data.

The evaluation process is outlined here.

- The starting point was a review of existing project documentation from inception (original application to TNLCF, Letter of Offer), a review of the annual Project Progress Reports and review of monitoring data captured annually.
- Development and circulation of an online survey.
- Through discussion with project staff, agreement was reached on the specific project outcomes to be evaluated and the key groups to be engaged in the evaluation process. These included.
  - Community Growers
  - Council Staff

Key to these approaches was the use of appreciative questions and stories informed by the Most Significant Change Process<sup>9</sup> that enabled participants and users to delve into the aspects of their involvement that have had impact, made a difference and around which there has been learning to draw on which might offer insight into thinking about the future.

The evaluator also attended the Annual Forum at the Playtrail in Derry on the 21<sup>st</sup> October 2023. Outline themes and findings were then brought to an online session with invited community growers and Council staff to begin co-designing the next chapter.

### 3.2 Report Structure

This Report summarises:

- Findings of the evaluation of the current project from 2019 - present, including the views and experiences of current project participants and other stakeholders,
- Conclusions, highlighting key learning,

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Most-significant-change.pdf>

- Recommendations for addressing key priorities for the future, building on SF&G's deep understanding for the need for reconnection and restoration with the land as part of a new political and community settlement.<sup>10</sup>

The Report explains how the project has benefitted project participants and others in the areas around the garden as well as the soil and the land itself.

The results show a cross section of information on benefit and impact. The Report includes information, views and ideas from volunteers and feedback from participants about improved health and well-being, stronger connections and relationships and understanding of the art of growing and biodiversity.



**Skill Share - Open Door Complex, Bellaghy, Mid Ulster**

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<sup>10</sup> Monbiot, G. (2017) *Out of the wreckage: a new politics for an age of crisis*, London: Verso.

## 4. Overview of the Growing Resilience Project

This section briefly provides an overview of the different elements and activities provided as part of the Growing Resilience Project in meeting the project's objectives. This section explains the outputs that were achieved in support of the outcomes.

### 4.1 Aims and Intended Outcomes

The Growing Resilience Project was focused on the following key **aims**:

1. Enable community growing volunteers and staff to connect and share skills, building confidence and support and build social capital
2. Organise networking forums and practical skills workshops across Northern Ireland and grow communities of interest
3. Deepen resilience and sustainable working in an ever-changing landscape
4. Develop to cover all local Council areas depending on need
5. Growing the evidence and shaping policy

These aims support delivery on the **outcomes** of the People and Communities programme which seek to support:

- People to make changes that improve their lives
- Communities to build on their strengths and share learning

Across these two overarching outcomes, the following three **key themes** are embraced, and underpin the project elements. These are:

- People-led – service users and beneficiaries are meaningfully involved in the development, design and delivery of the project
- Strengths-based – people and communities are supported to build on the knowledge, skills and experience they already have, to make the positive changes they want
- Connected – projects are developed based on clear understanding of and to complement existing activities and services in the community

### 4.2 Project Delivery

Following the delivery of the successful two-year project (2017-2019) an application was made to the National Lottery Community Fund which enabled the recruitment of a small core staff team of three who were able to expand and contract hours as needed as well as recruit Field Workers. The funding also provided running and project costs to support delivery of all the activities. The stability that the funding provided, also crucially allowed the team to lever in another £160,000 for programme work.

The original project application outlined a comprehensive range of activities designed to collectively deliver on the project aims and outcomes.

Activity	Project Year	Programme Outcome the Activity Links To
Visits to 8 groups for initial set up, discussion on skill sharing and their cluster	Each year	People-led, Strengths-based
Initial cluster meetings. 2 each project year to co-design the programme	Each year	People-led, Strengths-based, Connected
8 skill share workshops delivered by the groups using 'peer to peer skill-sharing'	Each year	People-led, Strengths-based, Connected
4 themed cluster workshops delivered	Each year	People-led, Strengths-based, Connected
2 Community Engagement /Community Capacity Workshops delivered	Each year	People-led, Strengths-based, Connected
1 Northern Ireland wide Forum meeting held	Each year	People-led, Strengths-based, Connected
Study visits, conferences and networking, at least 1 of these	Each year	Connected
2 on-line meetings of the Forum team organisers	Each year	People-led, Strengths-based, Connected
Evaluation  Development of a framework for self-evaluation and reflection  Use a self-evaluation framework each year. Capture evidence and best practice using photography and film	All years	People-led, Strengths-based, Connected

Delivery on the above activities began in 2019 by the staff team of Patricia Wallace NI Manager, Miriam Turley Senior Growing Resilience Officer and as a result of TNLCF funding the addition of Conor O’Kane as Growing Resilience Officer based in Derry/Londonderry bringing his community regenerative growing expertise to the team. Over the course of the project this purposely small team has used Field Workers and member groups to harness skills and use local knowledge to support delivery. From the beginning there has been a strong core focus on asset-based community development, activities with a clear health and wellbeing focus and the organising of networking events to create a thick network of relationships.

Each programme of events was developed with participating projects, tailoring support to their needs. This support depended on taking the time to grow personal relationships with



project leaders and their volunteers, developed through meetings and events. This was vital to ensuring that projects were meaningfully supported and allowing the confidence of individual volunteers to grow so they felt ready to provide training at the right time. The increased confidence of volunteers increased the social capital of the project with the focus on reducing workload of the project leader and increasing project resilience.

## Clusters and Groups - The Story So Far

Since 2016, SF&G have intentionally grown layers and patterns of thick relationships within and across communities, understanding that what we practise on a small scale can set the pattern for the whole system. They have adopted an emergent approach to their work:

**Relational**- in that time is required to grow the relationships that allow things to happen;  
**Porous** – supporting geographical, community and group boundaries become more fluid;  
**Adaptive** – always noticing and responding;  
**Fractal** – understanding that small changes in small places can ripple out;  
**Interdependent** – working in a way that strengthens networks, both visible and invisible;  
**Decentralised** – shifting power outwards and downwards; and  
**Transformative** – never transactional. <sup>11</sup>

<b>Chapter 1 Pilot Cluster 2016 - 2017</b>	
Cloughmills – Causeway Coast and Glens	Garvagh – Causeway Coast and Glens
Carntogher – Mid Ulster	Toome – Antrim and Newtownabbey
<b>Chapter 2 Growing Resilience: 2017 – 2019</b>	
<b>Bann Cluster – 4 groups</b>	<b>North Antrim Cluster – 4 groups</b>
An Carn – Mid Ulster	Cairns – Causeway Coast & Glens
Cloughmills – Causeway Coast & Glens	Cottage Wood – CC&G
Garvagh – Causeway Coast & Glens	Ballycastle Growers – CC&G
Toome – Antrim & Newtownabbey	Corrymeela – CC&G
<b>Fermanagh Cluster – 5 groups</b>	<b>Strabane Cluster – 9 groups</b>
Brookeborough – Fermanagh and Omagh	West Tyrone Gardening Friends
Devenish Enniskillen – Fermanagh and Omagh	Tullacorr Allotments - Strabane

<sup>11</sup> adrienne maree brown, Emergent Strategy – Shaping Change, Changing Worlds, 2017, p.56

Augher – Mid Ulster	Ballymagorry Development Group - Strabane
SEFF – Fermanagh and Omagh	Koram Centre – Strabane
Loughead - Lisnaskea	Calvert’s Cross – Strabane
	Gortin Community Garden Omagh
	Clady Cross Community Development Association Strabane
	Strabane Health Improvement Project
	Strabane Community Project

<b>Chapter 3 Growing Resilience: Digging Deeper 2019 – 2024</b>	
<b>Newry Mourne &amp; Down Cluster 20 groups (@60 people)</b>	<b>Derry City and Strabane Cluster 12 groups (@23 people)</b>
Downpatrick Community Allotments	Glen Development Association
Seeds Galore Newcastle	Ballymagowan Allotments
U3A Gardening Newry	Bunscoil Choimcille
Rostrevor Men’s Shed	St Columb’s Allotments
Camphill Mourne Grange	St Columb’s Park House
Green Spaces Warrenpoint	Greenfingers Allotments
Clanrye Group Newry	The Playtrail
Newtown Together	The Playhouse
Rathfriland Regeneration	Beekeepers Association
Hilltown Community Garden	Creggan Gardin Pobail
Hilltown Men’s Shed	Tullacorr Community Allotments
Killyleagh Plant swop group	Strabane Health Improvement Ballycolman
KIPS community Garden	

Yellow Road Farm	
Castlewellan Climate Change Group	
Dolmens Climate Action Network	
RIOT Dundrum	
Kingdom Men's Shed	
Newry Street Unite	
Borne from the Mourne	

<b>Ards &amp; North Down Cluster</b> <b>20 groups (@37 people)</b>	<b>Mid Ulster Cluster</b> <b>10 groups (@25 people)</b>
Comber Community Garden	Castledawson Allotments
Helen's Bay Organics	Bellaghy Community Garden
Hollywood Steiner School	Moneyneena Community Garden
Donaghadee Community Development Association	Sunflower Support Springhill
Loughries Men's Shed	Parkview Community Garden
Portaferry in Bloom	Kildress Walled Garden
Hollywood Shared Town	Tullymeadow Community Shed & Gardens
Ards Allotments	Parkanaur Walled Garden
Bryansburn Allotments	Castlecaufield
Branch Out Community Group	Loughshore Community Garden
Ballywalter Community Action Group	
Kilcooley Allotments	
Loaf, Crawfordsburn	
Millisle Community Association	
Millisle Health and Wellbeing Group	
Movilla Abbey Church	

Quarries Farm Allotments	
Hollywood Men's Shed	
Carrowdore Community Association	
St Columbanus College	

<b>Belfast City Cluster</b>
<b>34 groups (@70 people)</b>
North Belfast Children's Allotments
Peas Park Skegoneil
Restore Glandore ATC
GROW Waterworks
Carolan Road Alley Garden
Wildflower Alley Garden
Sandhurst Alley Garden
Garden of Eating
Raby St Community Garden
Friends of the Field
Eden Alley
North Belfast Garden Grid
New Lodge Youth Centre
Cliftonville Men's Shed
Gairdin An Phobail
Three Sisters Community Garden
Ardmore Rossmore Alley Garden
Carmel Street Community Garden
Miracle Way
Rainbow Alley

Donegall Pass Community Garden/Garden of Eatin’
Footprints Women’s Centre
Forthriver Community Garden
Forthspring
Open Ormeau
The Larder
NBWISP
Eglantine Community Garden
Eden Alley
Belfast Garden Grid/Ashton Centre
Rosemont Alley
Indian Community Centre
Cliftonville Men’s shed
Gairdín an Phobail

It is the testament of this small team that SF&G have supported over 96 groups since 2019 in the cycle of support that is different for each place and group.



**SF&G staff members Patricia Wallace, Miriam Turley and Conor O’Kane with Field Workers Philip Allen Permaculture Expert and Kelley Hann Mid Ulster Growing Resilience – Sustainable Buildings: Making a Cob Wall at the Stendhal Festival Limavady**



### 4.3 A Flavour of the Project’s Activities

The range of work spanning direct support for growing groups, linking, connecting and weaving relationships across groups and the advocacy and policy development cannot be fully represented in this report. However, below is a flavour of some of the work that has happened enabled through the Growing Resilience: Digging Deeper Project either through being directly supported by the Lottery funding or levered in as a result of the stability provided by the funding.



#### Skillshares in Growing Resilience




#### Promotional Video

[A link to our promotional video for Growing Resilience](#)

Over the course of the project groups from across NI have shared their skills, knowledge and expertise with others, creating a sense of confidence in the sector as well as providing opportunities to learn, build relationships and network. Because of the close relationship SF&G has built with participating groups, they are able to draw on aspects of practice that each group excels at. This can range from the practical gardening skills (composting, propagation), to practical DIY skills (making signs, wall building, building a shelter), to design skills, to the more administrative side of community growing (operating during covid, creating video content, volunteer management, writing funding applications, generating income). Specialist skills, like climate friendly gardening, social justice and outreach were also shared. One group also shared about how they formed partnerships with local food banks. On average 15 skillshare sessions happened each year of the project. This has the effect of elevating the work of community growers, to appreciate and celebrate the wide range of skills and ambitions growers have and practice. Community growing is not just about providing gardening sessions for people. It is a highly skilled and complex discipline, achieving multiple outcomes, and needs to be recognised as such.

2019 - 2020	Skill-Shares
<p><b>Newry Mourne &amp; Down</b> Sign making and Pyrography (Rathfriland)</p> <p>[Online] Elder propagation</p> <p>Making your own fat balls for bird feeders (Hilltown)</p>	

<p><b>Derry City &amp; Strabane</b> Beekeeping and honey processing (Strabane)</p>	
<p><b>Themed Clusters – NI Wide</b> No Dig Gardening (Cooneen, Brookeborough Fermanagh) [Online] Fruit Bush Propagation [Online] Seed saving [Online] Practical Permaculture: Forest Gardening [Online] Practical Permaculture: making a compost riddle [Online] Operating during covid: Top tips. [Online] Creating video content [Online] Alley Gardening</p>	<p><a href="https://www.facebook.com/farmgarden.NorthernIreland/videos/656916935082938/">https://www.facebook.com/farmgarden.NorthernIreland/videos/656916935082938/</a></p> 
<p><b>2020-21</b> <b>Newry Mourne &amp; Down</b>  Building a covid friendly shelter (Warrenpoint) [Online] Garden design (Kilkeel)</p>	

<p><b>Ards &amp; North Down</b>          Generation income from plant sales (Millisle)          Polyculture and volunteer management (Comber)          Wall building and site restoration (Holywood)          [Online] Writing a usage agreement for sharing a site with multiple groups</p>	
<p><b>Themed Clusters NI Wide</b>          [Online] Gardening around the world          [Online] Fruit bush Propagation          [Online ] Mindfulness          [Online] Fruit bush Propagation          [Online} Operating during Covid]</p>	
<p><b>2021-22</b></p>	
<p><b>Newry Mourne &amp; Down</b>          Seed saving (Rostrevor)          Climate Friendly Gardening (Newry)          Social Farming and Blackcurrant propagation (Hilltown)</p>	
<p><b>Ards &amp; North Down</b>          Partnerships with Food Banks (Kilcooley)          Composting</p>	



<p><b>Belfast</b>                  Tour and Garden maintenance (Footprints)                  No dig Gardening (NBWISP)                  Solar energy and Rainwater Collection (GROW)                  Potato Planting in Containers (Rainbow alley)                  Clay oven building (GaP)                  Growing for wildlife (Wildflower alley)                  Incorporating art into garden (Peas Park)</p>	 
<p><b>Themed Clusters NI Wide</b>                  [Online] climate Friendly Gardening                  [Online] Gardening around the world</p>	
<p><b>2022-23</b></p>	
<p><b>NM&amp;D</b>                  Seed saving &amp; Plantswop (Rostrevor)                  [Online] Top tips for writing a funding application</p>	
<p><b>Belfast</b>                  Outreach and Social Justice (Grow)                  Gardening for Wildlife (Eglantine)</p>	



Using Art in Alleyways  
(Rainbow Alley)  
Fundraising and  
contributions in kind  
(Rainbow Alley)  
Skills and Training (Three  
Sisters)  
Information and  
Communication (Open  
Ormeau)  
Creating seasonal wreaths.  
(Musgrave)



**NI Wide**  
Incorporating Health and  
Wellbeing into community  
growing (SHIP)



**2023-24**



**Belfast**

Compost building and wildlife  
(Holyland Community  
Garden)



Since 2019 the project has connected, provided support, and walked alongside 96 growing groups across Northern Ireland. The cycle of engagement has followed the cycle of the seasons and the rhythm of groups. During ‘spring’ or the ‘start of a group’ there is great excitement, exuberance and hope and the SF&G team’s role then is often to guide, settle and help develop a plan that is possible and feasible for the volunteers involved and the land itself. During ‘summer’ or the ‘time when a group settles down’ SF&G purpose might be to support the delivery of skills training, help work through unexpected challenges and problems as the garden grows. ‘Autumn’ is a time of harvest but also in a group’s rhythm might be the point of knowing what to let go of, what hasn’t worked, and understanding points of stress. SF&G’s role might be to help the group reflect and make sense of its work and connect with others. ‘Winter’ time is a point of rest and for a group to recognize its need for rest and recuperation. However, the relationship is dormant rather than gone, waiting for the point where energies might re-emerge, new volunteers come on the scene, a new opportunity needs seized.



## Lockdown Gardening

**Lockdown Gardening** As the Covid-19 crisis emerged, SF&G, like so many other organisations, was determined to use its resources to support local growing groups facing multiple challenges. The Lottery provided uplift funding during this time that allowed the project to happen.

*“We launched Lockdown Gardening and Lockdown Videos, supporting community gardens to support their communities, turning around the phrase community gardening to gardening in the community. Twenty-four community growing spaces of all types across NI applied to our advert. We went into a busy period of ordering and packaging seeds and distributing them to community growers to in turn support*

*their communities to grow. The distribution of the seeds was followed up with popular 3 min video hacks and resource sheets with all first-time growers needed to know.” (Project Report 2019-2020)*

This was an initiative to support community growing members to turn their growing from Community Growing to Growing in the Community – to safely distribute compost and seeds for people to grow at home or for them to bring on more plants at their sites and then distribute them in their communities. It was urgent, people were at home and had the time, maybe for the first time in their lives, to germinate seeds and grow their own supply of fresh vegetables.

*“The simple gardening at home of course is not simple, trial and error, but when you succeed - joy! To see a seed germinate is so hopeful, especially at a time of crisis; it’s good for the soul. This activity connected people with the wider discussion on the production of our food. Where does it come from? How fresh is it? Is it organic? What has it been sprayed with? It also connects people to the discussions on physical, mental and environmental wellbeing – how much the outdoors means to us, how much nature contributes to our wellbeing – people are resetting their values. As we take the tentative steps of coming out of Lock Down, we are facing, not just a recession but a depression while conversely nature has gained from less human activity. We have an opportunity to reset priorities. Can we transition to a new economy and environment that takes account of nature? – the seed has been planted.” (Project Report 2019-2020)*

SF&G had already decided to be innovative with recording their work through use of photography and film – this became essential during lockdown and the move to on-line working. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qm6mqSqT8\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qm6mqSqT8_8)

## **Community Fruit Forest**

This was an initiative that arose out of the COVID19 crisis and supported by the uplift provided by the Lottery. The project responded to the growing awareness of both the food resource for propagation and distribution of cuttings, offsets and sets for years to come – greening neighbourhoods and providing true resilience against the stormy times ahead. insecurity that exists within our communities, and the great desire and capacity of people to share what they produce with their neighbours. The idea of the fruit forest is to provide a community with a range of fruit bushes trees herbs and bulbs that will not only produce food for families and neighbours and local wildlife on an ongoing basis but will be a living

*“The project envisaged that the people who accepted these plants would become community guardians of that variety, accepting a duty to grow it on and join in propagating fresh plants yearly so that in time the neighbourhood will be producing a valuable surplus for distribution or community processing. The range of fruiting times means that a long season will result, and with exchange between those who are growing, there should be fresh healthy fruit available from early summer to late autumn.” (SF & G Team)*

Knowing the names of the varieties and the stories of where the plants originated and their subsequent journeys introduced another opportunity for community storytelling and reinforced the natural ties that bring people together. The more distributed the forest is, the greater its strength in many ways – as there will be a wider range of habitats with different soils and aspects for the plants to grow in, and a greater number of people looking out for the plants with both a personal and community interest in how they do.

*“We have received many photos of the fruit trees and bushes’ harvest from the community gardens and their communities who took part in the Community Fruit Forest scheme. The impact of Growing Resilience’s Community Fruit Forest Scheme was across NI in all communities urban and rural. It was a huge undertaking for our small staff team, but the impact helped both our community gardens and SF&G in NI to be resilient in the face of a crisis. While people were furloughed in society, we were at the peak of delivery alongside the community gardens.” (Project Report 2020-21)*

Adopt a fruit tree or bush with the Playtrail.



Would you like to adopt a fruit tree or bush for your garden? And in years to come take cuttings or divisions to make more plants for your neighbours? We are partnering with Social Farms and Gardens to find homes for a limited number of apple, plum, raspberry, blackcurrant and redcurrant plants. If you are interested please get in touch.



**One of our younger fruit foresters, Josh from Rostrevor Integrated PS in 2020**



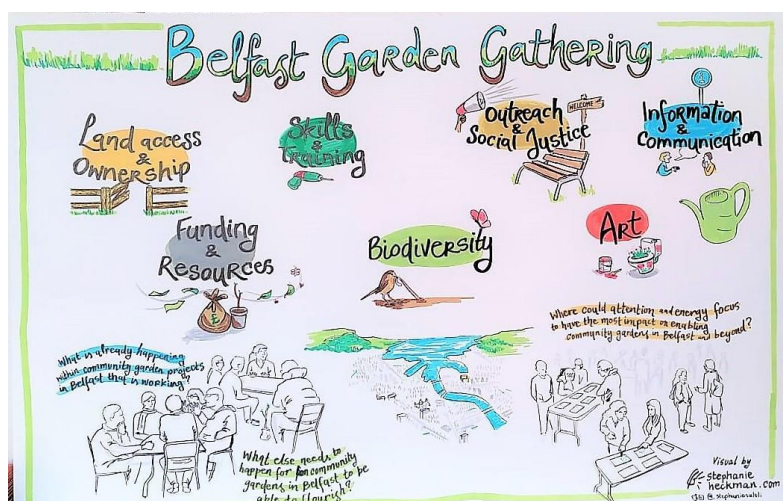
## URBAN NETWORKS

### Belfast Alleyways Network



SF&G have been supporting a group of alleyway and guerrilla gardening projects to form a collective to meet and identify support needs, and to communicate these with Belfast City Council. A Field Worker, Brenda Gough from the Three Sisters Garden, was contracted to help with the scheduling and promotion of the visits and skill shares between groups. The collective is active in lobbying to 'green' the city and trying to ensure good practice is followed for the allocation of funding for the Alleyways. Fun Gardening Together was a newly formed ethnic minority group who attended events with SF&G support. A Rainwater Harvesting and Renewable Energy workshop, filmed for the promotion of the programme can be seen here <https://vimeo.com/738454832>.

### 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. Its purpose is 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 their communities. In the past 2 years they have visited each other's sites, shared their skills and



resources, met with City Councillors to discuss issues of importance to community growing in the city and have made a presentation to the People and Communities Committee. They jointly organised the Belfast Gathering and organised an open day of eleven community growing sites across Belfast. They have taken action to make their gardens more inclusive and diverse and continue to prioritise social justice outcomes in their work. They meet regularly and have a WhatsApp group to support each other and plan future action.

*“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 greenspaces.”<sup>12</sup>*

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. Others 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 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 need recognised for all they accomplish on the basis of local trust and connection to their place.

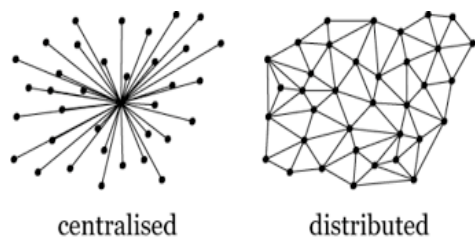
These needs and possibilities were voiced in March 2023 at the Belfast Garden Gathering, hosted by the Reclaim the Commons Network and supported by SF&G. This event was planned in response to a perceived lack of coordinated support for growing in the city.

*“Reclaim the Commons has been a strong collective voice for pushing a community growing strategy. Need to co-design framework with Council.” (Interviewee)*

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<sup>12</sup> Reclaim Commons Report - 2023

## From centralised to distributed networks



- The team's ambition is to move to a distributed network in each area from a 'beginning' place where energy and work might revolve around a staff member. This has been challenging, shifting to a place where value is shared with all who have co-created it; where power dynamics are noticed to then redistribute across the relationships.
- *"Our key learning is that there needs to be a structure and people need roles. There is also the difference between 'knocking on doors' and communities 'knocking on our door'". (SF&G)*
- The energy is already in a different place.

## Equality, Diversity and Inclusion



The SF&G staff team has grown a strong programme of work focused on supporting the environment sector to become more inclusive. Part of this was the Change Starts with Us report prepared by Northern Ireland Environment Link, looking at ethnic diversity in the environmental sector in Northern Ireland. SF&G featured as a case study in this report, and following the consultations, the staff team maintained relationships formed with staff in other environmental groups. This resulted in the creation of an informal support group between staff in RSPB, SF&G and the National Trust. This group met every two months through the latter half of 2023 and supported each other grow new relationships and networks with organisations representing ethnic minority groups.

A number of initiatives over the last five years were designed to increase openness to participation from ethnically minoritized people:

- Gardening around the World Webinar, which shared gardening techniques from Northern Irish gardeners of international origin, for example polycultural growing.
- The Minority Ethnic Fruit tree group, who were facilitated to participate in the Fruit Forest programme with additional community development support.
- The Fun Gardening programme, organised in partnership with Grow and the Chinese Welfare Association, which facilitated 8 international gardeners to visit 4 sites across Belfast for gardening sessions. This project provided travel costs for participants, as this can be a barrier, especially for those in the asylum system. (This programme was categorised as a “Community of interest cluster” as it involved the participation of 4 gardens wishing to welcome more ethnically diverse participants).

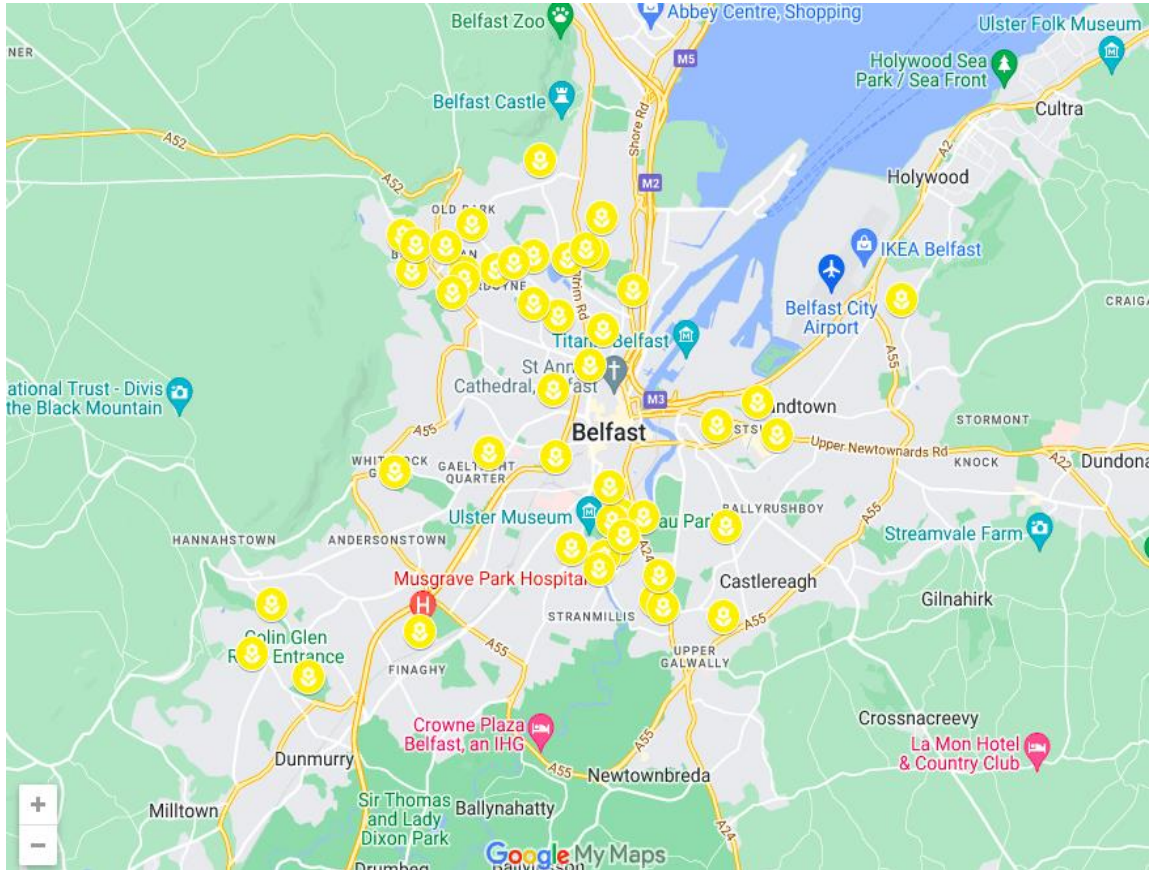
SF&G also ran two “Gardening with Pride” events in partnership with the Rainbow Project as part of the annual Belfast Pride season, one of which was designed specifically for trans people and their families.



In the coming year there will be a series of internal UK-wide peer to peer trainings, including the following topics:

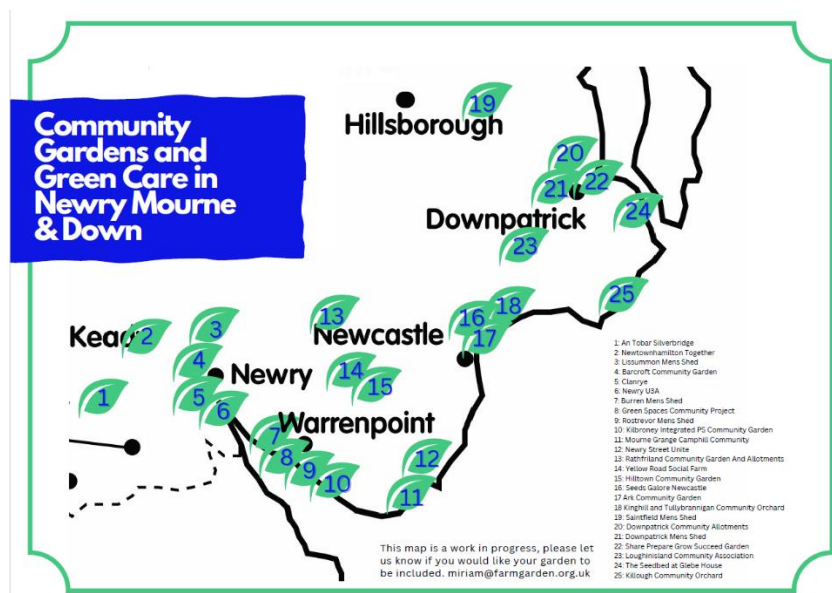
- Asset-based recruitment
- Indices of Multiple Deprivation as a tool to measure reach
- Creating accessible digital forms and publications
- Addressing linguistic exclusion, dismantling English hegemony (Irish and Welsh language in our publications and work with members)

## Mapping



Mapping community growing spaces can become a powerful learning and advocacy tool which can be layered on top of other data such as deprivation, population densities, access to services, housing need etc. SF&G have developed this map for Belfast and a draft one for Newry Mourne & Down Cluster.





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- *“Creating maps really works – people can see themselves, and others and it really seems to encourage people to volunteer. In Belfast, there were around 1-2 people every week coming through Volunteer Now because of the map.” (SF & G staff member)*
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- [https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=13x5xtxK-aaixDF\\_X6oj0cyr7bPzhyNg&ll=54.59930442244858%2C-5.938404399999999&z=12](https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=13x5xtxK-aaixDF_X6oj0cyr7bPzhyNg&ll=54.59930442244858%2C-5.938404399999999&z=12)

## POLICY AND ADVOCACY WORK

SF&G translates the experience of communities wanting to Grow into addressing programmes, policies and resources required for the sector not to survive but to thrive.

In 2020 SF&G produced A State of the Sector Report, in 2023 SF&G co-designed a Benchmark Standard for Community Growing and Allotment Provision. This Benchmark Standard was presented by SF&G NI at the Horticulture Enquiry held by the House of Lords. Belfast City Council has approved the report’s core recommendation of a third of an acre of land to be the target provision of community growing space per 1000 households.

SF&G also produced the Framework and Action Plan for Sustainable Food Places for Belfast City Council along with partners from the Food Ethic Council and Food Poverty expert from UU.

## The Case for a Benchmark Standard for Community Growing and Allotment Provision in Northern Ireland <sup>13</sup>



*In 2023, we set out recommendations for a community growing benchmark in Northern Ireland.*

SF&G and Local Council officers from each of the 11 Local Councils worked together to co-design this proposed Benchmark Standard for Community Growing and Allotment Provision in NI. In addition, the report recommends actions to support the sector to flourish. The 18-month piece of work involved organising workshops with expert input, discussion groups, interviews and policy information network meetings examining the amount of land designated for community growing and the varying processes and barriers across Northern Ireland for the release of public land.

The report aimed at Councils and decision makers provides a framework for policy development on the amount of land dedicated to community growing. A key recommendation is a target of 1250sqm (0.3 acres) community growing space per 1,000 households in a Council area. Community growing spaces could include allotments, community gardens or community orchards.

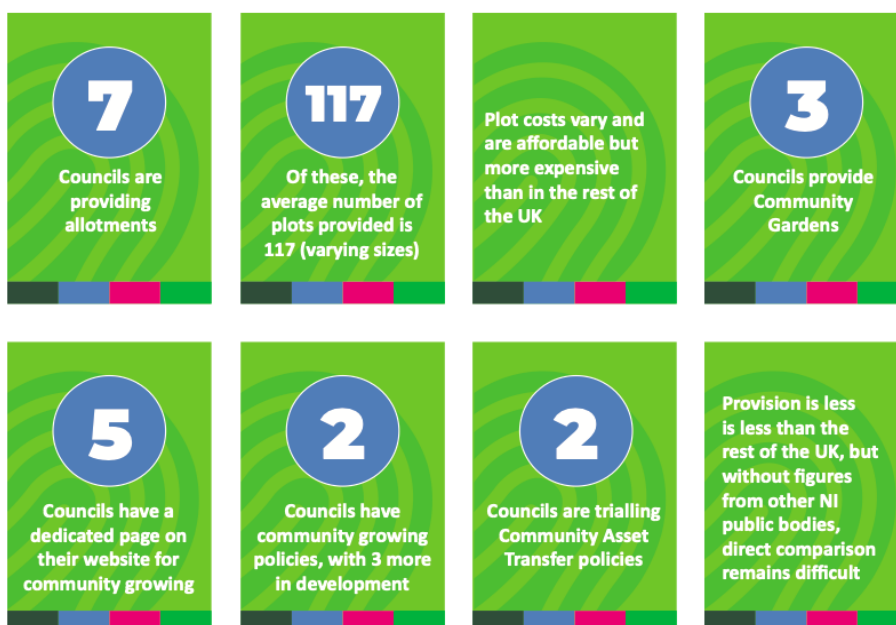
*“Engaging Local Councils in NI to reimagine possibilities for public land has been one of the most significant achievements of community land use advocates in recent decades. The work of Social Farms & Gardens in NI has subtly engaged local government to consider bigger picture opportunities, opportunities that are taking shape in the emergence of social farms and community gardens, adding support for collective ownership to sit alongside the tradition of allotment growing. A new narrative is beginning to take shape and play out. Public bodies are considering the social value their assets present to fulfil policy objectives concerned with personal*

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/community-growing-benchmark-northern-ireland>

*health and wellbeing. New forms of community organising are visible across our villages, towns and cities covering large heritage landscape management to support for the most marginalised in our society with access to social farms and gardens.*  
**(Charlie Fisher, Chief Executive Officer, Development Trusts NI)**

*“A key weakness identified in Northern Ireland is that public bodies have no statutory duty to provide allotments or community gardens, unlike in the rest of the UK and Ireland. Having since carried out detailed research with all 11 councils into the provision of allotment plots and community gardening space in Northern Ireland, and taking into consideration the surge in demand for community growing space in recent years (and especially since March 2020), we believe that now is the time to provide a benchmark standard to aid local authorities and public bodies in NI in bringing the quantity (and quality) of provision in line with and beyond the rest of the UK.”<sup>14</sup>*

### Summary of findings



<sup>14</sup> <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/community-growing-benchmark-northern-ireland> p.8

## ADDED VALUE

There were a number of projects that were levered in as a result of the financial stability provided by TNLCF. These brought significant added value to the Growing Resilience Project.

### Bunscoil Cholmcille



SF&G collaborated with the Bunscoil Cholmcille in Derry on their successful Live Here Love Here application for the Imagination Island project. This consisted of helping the school design and build 86 raised beds, source compost and soil and encourage every year group within the school to grow plants.

*"This year onions, garlic, spuds, and pumpkins have been the most popular and successful, with many planting flowers also." (Teacher)*

SF G were subsequently approached by other Primary Schools for advice, including Steelstown and Chapel Road Primary Schools for growing support.

<https://www.derryjournal.com/education/in-pictures-derry-halloween-bunscoil-cholmcilles-imaginations-islands-get-a-spooky-makeover-3436819?page=2>



## Cosmic Composting



'Cosmic Composting' are three engaging and timely films linking the work of composters and community gardens with climate change. They were part of the 'Food for the Planet' programme organised by SF&G on behalf of Ards and North Down Borough Council.

*"When we make compost, we are working intimately with natural forces & natural processes. Within our compost bins are some of the building blocks of the universe itself, created in the distant past: the core of stars, the very materials every living thing, including ourselves, are made from. With our compost we help plants extract from the soil those elements they need to live and thrive."*

*"Our compost is the perfect environment for microbial life to thrive. Microbial life helps make these nutrients available to the plants in a format they can easily absorb. At the end of the day the moral of the story, if you want healthy, sustainable, nutrient rich plants, is to feed the soil with quality organic matter in the form of compost, not the plants themselves." (John McClean – Composter)*

The Science of Composting

<https://youtu.be/sbBZhclv-cE>

Making Compost

[https://youtu.be/bgWhed\\_VwsE](https://youtu.be/bgWhed_VwsE)

## Springhill Allotments – Sunflower Support NI



Sunflower Support NI is an inclusive charity in Mid Ulster that works to support the community & to support families, carers & individuals with an additional need. This can be anything from autism, learning disabilities, dementia, genetic conditions ,acquired injury, physical social & emotional conditions. One of their gathering spaces is the walled garden at Springhill House, Moneymore where they have some allotments as well as use of the whole enclosed space for play, relaxation and growing. A small grant from SF&G and then the support from the Mid-Ulster Field Worker enabled the group to learn how and what to plant in their allotment space as well as supporting them with wider ‘outdoor learning’ activities and play.

*“This garden has been a godsend for the families. A secure place where parents/carers can breathe, know that others are looking out for their kids and be in the outdoors gardening, playing, growing, eating. All completely voluntary. A parent having their own time and space for the first time in a month kneeling down to weed.” (Interviewee)*

## Participatory Grant Making



Through the 'Food for the Planet' project, part of Ards and North Down Council's Sustainable Food Places programme, SF&G trialled Participatory Grant Making distributing 12 micro grants to local community growing projects. This was a highly successful demonstration project of distributing grants in a collaborative way.



Community Gardeners in Moira supported by SF&G





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



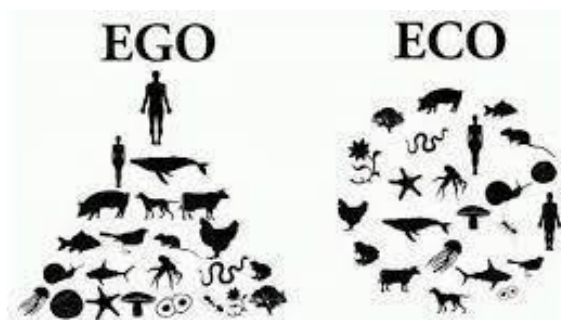
## 5. Evaluation Findings

### 5.1 Creating Value – 2 + 1 Outcomes Framework

The Growing Resilience Project was initially conceived as delivering against two outcomes:

- **People making changes that improve their lives**
- **Communities that build on their strengths and share learning**

However, critical to the systems change we find ourselves in, is changing how we relate to the rest of the natural world and the mental models we carry shaped by and shaping an economic system predicated on an extractive relationship. Whilst ‘outcomes for growing spaces’ was not an initial Community Fund outcome, the Growing Resilience Project is firmly in the space of recognizing that our health and wellbeing as people is interdependent with the wellbeing of non-human species, the soil, water and air. This is land-based community development.



Leonardo da Vinci remarked that we know more about the movement of the celestial bodies than about the soil on our own planet. This remains as true today.

Noticing, naming and understanding the value of the world around us that keeps the planet a habitable place is part of changing our mental models. And in the context of the Growing Resilience Project and this report, it is important that we notice, name and understand soil which has led to all the outputs, outcomes and value that this project has brought.

*“Soil, which we once saw as a homogenous mass, is composed of structures within structures. Earthworms, roots and fungi create clumps of soil, glued together with the fibres and sticky chemicals they make, called aggregates. Within these aggregates, tiny animals like mites and springtails create smaller clumps. Within them, bacteria and their microscopic predators – creatures I cannot see even with my loupe, such as tardigrades, ciliates and amoebas – form still smaller aggregates.”<sup>15</sup>*

Therefore, a third outcome has been added:

- **More resilient growing spaces**

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<sup>15</sup> Monbiot, G., *Regenesis* (2022), p.23

This section of the report explores what has been achieved against these outcomes and the three Community Fund themes of people led, building on people's strengths, and building and strengthening connections.



## 5.2 The Outcome Challenges

This report has identified key activities under each outcome delivering against relevant objectives. Some of these activities are ongoing programmes of work whilst others were one-offs.

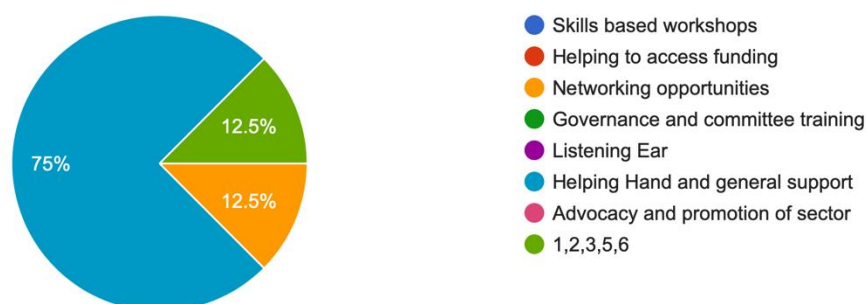
Outcome Challenge 1: People Make Changes that Improve their Lives	
1.1 Enable community growing volunteers and staff to connect and share skills, building confidence and support and build social capital	<p>-Individual group support on issues focusing on:</p> <p>*Relationships in the group. E.g.: inclusion; supporting volunteers; conflict resolution; noticing &amp; valuing existing knowledge and skills etc.</p> <p>*Relationships with the land. E.g. composting; growing plans; seed saving; watershed management etc..</p>

This outcome challenge and associated objective is about people being given the space and being valued in their growing spaces leading to new confidences and relationships. It speaks to the first dimension of ‘bonding’ in social capital theory.

### Further Insights

These insights are informed both by interviews held and survey results.

Q. 4 What areas of the project have you found helpful?



The survey responses indicate that the most helpful areas of support for community growers have been ‘helping hand’ which includes being there when needed; ‘networking opportunities’ and support with strengthening the local group such as ‘governance and committee’ training.

### **Helping Hand & Walking Alongside**

Many of those interviewed backed up the survey, reflecting on the importance of SF&G staff<sup>16</sup> coming alongside at important moments, providing practical help, and as importantly, quietly giving confidence.

*“A key time for us was during the town festival and the garden became part of it for the first time. Colm Sands came in and he was totally taken aback by the space. We saw it through his eyes, and we realised how much we had achieved. SF&G was there and has always been there quietly helping in whatever we want to do and our planning. From doing up posters, organising networking, providing small pots of money, encouraging, nudging, making the food.” (Interviewee)*

*“The ongoing support which allows us to maintain and sustain the garden through the seasons. Each year I become better at what needs done but we need SF&G there to pick us up when down, nudge us into our dreams and provide those small bits of funding to allow us to make things happen.” (Interviewee)*

*“A story that stays with me is an SF&G staff member sitting cross legged in the house opposite having brought up some folk from the Mud Island Community Garden in Dublin. There were diverse people brought together – all the elements were there, and SF&G was the magic that turned those elements into gold.” (Interviewee)*

*“It’s been great when we’ve held events in the garden and SF&G have got alongside people planting and weeding. Again, someone different in the garden – gives us energy and allows us to be noticed and valued.” (Interviewee)*

*“Our 1<sup>st</sup> Workshop focused on summer activities – blue sky thinking. We never had the opportunity to do that before. Think we called our first workshop ‘come and have your say – community gardening and biodiversity.’ SF&G helped with this and the workshop inspired people. The plant share came from this as well as another 3 projects.” (Interviewee)*

The fluidity of the supportive relationship is key and it’s interesting also to note how the approach of the staff model permeates and seeps into the groups work, function and welcome.

*“The way we work is to follow the energy – don’t seek permission or approval. Just go with where the energy is.” (Interviewee)*

*“Our coordinator is also instinctively democratic and has created a generous and inclusive decision-making space for the volunteers.” (Interviewee)*

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<sup>16</sup> Where individual staff members were mentioned by those interviewed, names have been replaced by SF & G.



*“I got involved when I popped my head over the hawthorn hedge one day and saw the garden and the volunteers. That was me sucked in – it gave me something to do after retirement. And my son went to this school.” (Interviewee)*

*“Start something good and the next good thing will follow.” (Interviewee)*

Many spoke to the exhaustion and trauma of Covid and the expectation that we ‘need to move on.’ SF&G for some allowed them to sit with the hard things and work them out.

*“There was a moment when I was at the end of my tether – the finances weren’t stacking up. I rang up SF&G and they helped me through that period.” (Interviewee)*

*“It’s hard when your work is in your home (Social Farm) – you don’t have the same confidence to push it, to seek support.” (Interviewee)*

### **Learning and Sharing New Knowledge**

This theme came through very strongly and consistently in the interviews about the importance of skills-based workshops and practical support.

*“SF&G has been a stepping stone to building confidence and now we have a 17k grant to develop our wildlife sensory garden. There are four in the core workers group -we are hoping to encourage wider community interest. And to develop the garden as part of a wildlife corridor from Cavehill to the Waterworks. The important questions that SF&G are supporting us answer include:*

*-What do you do about this?*

*-How to engage volunteers?*

*-How to always ensure fun?*

*-How to keep the tea and biscuits flowing?*

*-To keep the approach that if 1 person only does 1 hour that is still one hour less for you.*

*-How to deal with vandalism/theft.*

*-How to get beyond the normal 4.”*

*-How to keep volunteering light – and never get to the stage where people say ‘oh my god, there’s x about to hassle me.” (Interviewee)<sup>17</sup>*

*“We are at an advanced level in our garden. Our challenge is now developing a growing plan ensuring that we have the right facilities, structures, and volunteers in place. SF&G is helping us with this – it’s practical stuff such as what can we grow in*

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<sup>17</sup> Social Farms & Gardens has produced a fact sheet on fun ways of inviting and sustaining volunteers.

*each season, how we can influence and engage with Council; how do we get produce out.” (Co-Design Online Workshop)*

*“Community growing is not all bumble bees and daffodils. It’s tough and sometimes we have people more interested in the social aspect than the work.” (Co-Design Online Workshop)*

*“We all face challenges and it’s knowing that we are all different and that there’s no end point. It can be a struggle to keep going sometimes.” (Co-Design Online Workshop)*

Some of the practical stuff includes supporting groups grow a good relationship with their Council.

*“When we started, we had no growing skills. We just had enthusiasm. There was also so much technical stuff with leases and arrangements with the Council. SF&G have mediated and advocated on our behalf as the only experience we had of negotiating with the Council was to do with bins.” (Co-Design Online Workshop)*

*“I don’t have time to meet up with all the growing groups in this area – some can be very small. But it’s great knowing that SF&G can.” (Council Officer Interviewee)*

*“The seed saving workshop with SF&G which brought groups together from so many areas. It really changed my way of thinking about food.” (Interviewee)*

**Once again, the approach, value base and ethos** were noted as being as important as the knowledge and skills the staff were noticing, valuing and adding to.

*“SF&G are particularly good at capturing knowledge in an area that otherwise would be lost to people in a way that doesn’t feel heavy-handed, and it also gives the person respect for all they have put in.” (Interviewee)*

*“The approach taken by SF&G is so important in allowing people to learn – particularly in the current time having come through Covid and volunteers are feeling tired. If someone feels respected and liked and appreciated and recognized I feel they have a better chance to reflect and continue their community journey.” (Interviewee)*

*“But we are not quite yet at the point of reaching out to others and it continues to be a challenge. Part of the challenge is that the group doesn’t see themselves as having knowledge. The first point of contact is so important – if it’s with someone who is an ‘expert’ and has been doing it for years etc., this can lead to members devaluing themselves. SF&G works in a radically different way.” (Interviewee)*

### **Health and Happiness**

A small piece of land can bring so much joy and grounding for people, reducing the sense of being alone with the garden as a place to experience ‘good community’.

*“We now run two green gyms per week and are developing new social growing spaces.” (Survey Respondent)*

*“There is something very empowering when you realise that you can do something about the big issues such as climate change on your little piece of land. I suddenly felt I could do something.” (Co-Design Online Workshop)*

*“I only live round the corner from the garden. It is closed in with a barrier and gate to keep it secure, so I thought it wasn’t for me. I watched with longing and so wanted to get involved. When I realised how easy it was to walk through the gate it made me think about the blocks people can perceive.” (Co-Design Online Workshop)*

*“I returned to live in this village after many years. I became sick and after that retreated into the house. The garden has helped in my healing, has rooted me back here and has led to so many new connections and relationships. Our ‘leaders’ carry their expertise lightly. This garden has been life changing. There have been so many different branches. My nutrition has even changed as I’ve learned about food and growing.” (Interviewee)*

*“I had no idea that working with earth can boost my own immune system.” (Interviewee)*

*“When a new family arrives – I can turn ‘waste’ from Olio into a cake for people who perhaps don’t often feel welcomed.” (Interviewee)*

### **Agency and Making Decisions**

Feeling respected, seen and valued is how we grow. Some of those interviewed reflected that this respect is foundational in inviting and sustaining volunteers.

*“I have been part of groups where I haven’t felt seen or valued. This is different. We can only learn how to grow if we are noticed and valued and feel involved in the decisions.” (Interviewee)*

*“Dance and flow of volunteers – allowing people to leave if they need to and keep their space warm when they’re ready to come back. SF&G are very good at reminding us to keep the boundaries of groups fluid.” (Interviewee)*



## **Gifting**

*“Conor never comes without a gift.” (Interviewee)*

This phrase was often said and speaks to SF&G instinctively understanding that practising and embodying alternative ways of interacting in our economy is part of this work. Teaching to think about our produce in terms of what needs put aside as seeds for next year; what could be sold or exchanged; and what can be gifted allowing us to create community.

*“The Fruit Trees were lovely given by SF&G – raspberries; pears; apples. It’s been lovely to be able to donate produce to families. I managed to also give away potatoes and the kids sent in photos of all the different dishes the potatoes made. We’re at the stage now of needing to learn how to take cuttings properly.” (Interviewee)*

## **Unlearning**

This theme wasn’t raised that frequently, but it speaks to the transition times we are in – it’s not just about learning new practices but also understanding which ones we have to ‘unlearn’ and let go of at an individual, group, cultural and societal level.

### **Outcome Challenge 2: Communities to build on their strengths and share learning**

2.1 Organise networking opportunities, fora and practical skills workshops across Northern Ireland and grow communities of interest.

-Growing Resilience Clusters in five council areas : Derry and Strabane (2), Newry Mourne and Down, Ards and North Down, Belfast (2) and Mid Ulster. In total these groups included the sustained, participation and repeat attendance at online and in person events and meetings and in the WhatsApp groups.

Causeway Coast and Glens, and Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon are being completed 2023 – 2024.

Each cluster had its own in person meet ups, skill shares, networking events and in person and online meetings. Each cluster also had its own emergent outcome and WhatsApp group.



	<p>Mid &amp; East Antrim had bespoke support to the Eden Allotments (200 plots the largest in NI).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-15 capacity building workshops (on and offline) with 608 participants from community gardens across Northern Ireland were held.</li><li>-Four networking Forums, two of which were online and run in partnership with Community Gardens Ireland, to give gardens access to a wider network.</li><li>-Themed clusters E.g. Food Security through Seed Saving and Exchange, Soil and Compost, Green Care.</li><li>-27 Instructional videos with 37k views in total, plus one video with 1.1k views in response to COP26, representing the contribution community gardens can make to climate adaptation, and one video on access to land.</li><li>-A special series of garden visits organised in collaboration with GROW NI and the Chinese Welfare Association to facilitate newcomers to Belfast to visit community gardens.</li><li>-Two “Gardening with Pride” events, run in partnership with The Rainbow Project and Grow NI.</li><li>-The Fruit Forest programme, which reached up to <a href="#">2,100 households</a> across NI with fruit trees, fruit bushes and instructional materials, and the Lockdown gardening programme which reached up to 960 households across NI. Both of these programmes supported groups outside of the main GR clusters.</li><li>-6 workshops with sustainable food practitioners UK wide looking at the best practise for facilitating networks, following the Unlocking Networks Toolkit, involving the collaboration of Soil Association and Sustain some of the original authors of the toolkit.</li><li>-Impact of community growing on communities. <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tF3pc-mYAjs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tF3pc-mYAjs</a></li></ul>
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2.2 Deepen resilience and sustainable working in an ever-changing landscape.	<p>-The project has benefited over 96 groups and communities involved in growing projects across the Council areas of Belfast, Derry &amp; Strabane, Ards &amp; North Down, Mid Ulster and Newry, Mourne &amp; Down. The project has also benefited groups throughout NI who attended themed clusters and SF&amp;G's Annual Forum meeting.</p> <p>-The original clusters set in the pilot were also sustained.</p>

2.4 Develop to cover all local Council areas depending on need.	<p>-Geographical clusters were established in Newry Mourne &amp; Down, Derry &amp; Strabane (2019-2020). Ards &amp; North Down, North &amp; West Belfast (2020-21) expanding into the Belfast Reclaim the Commons Network, Mid Ulster (2021-22) with ongoing support of the Fermanagh cluster (2019-2020) and the Causeway Coast &amp; Glens cluster.</p> <p>SF&amp;G responded to need in Mid &amp; East Antrim – in depth support to Eden Allotments; Lisburn &amp; Castlereagh and Antrim &amp; Newtownabbey.</p>
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This outcome and associated objectives focus on the bridging and linking dimensions of social capital. In other words, weaving relationships between groups and with decision makers.

### Further Insights

#### Networking

Networking is not just about groups visiting each other. It is about contributing to systems change with the premise that we are all little islands but when you join those islands together, you can start creating a new continent.

*“A story I remember is in 2022 and I was presenting at an all-Ireland event in Dublin. It was so empowering to see other people doing similar stuff and the battles they have faced and sometimes not got through. Amazing the tiny spaces people have carved out in built up estates for being together differently. That’s where I first saw a pizza oven; brought that back to Derry; SF&G did some weaving and magic and we were able to offer the challenge of building a cob oven bringing in the volunteers and support of the other groups.” (Interviewee)*

*“I also connect with the SF&G resource UK wide. The year membership has been worth it. Being connected builds up confidence and grows awareness about what’s*

*happening in NI and across the UK. It's an eye opener about what is possible. My horizons have been expanded and I can go to my school and say 'do you know what you could do?'* (Interviewee)

*"Networking with other like-minded groups has been a godsend – sharing advice and gifts."* (Co-Design Online Workshop)

*"Being with other groups allowed me to realise that things are possible. We could have dropped the project at every single stage as it was so complicated negotiating our lease. But we kept going – in part because we saw others had got through."* (Co-Design Online Workshop)

*"The choice to meet in different community gardens meant that we all got to get a taste of one another's spaces. This was always layered with something interesting to do that was a real draw to want to be involved. It also prepared the ground for people to share their own skills and the unique flavour of each garden. The craic was an important ingredient too - something useful to come for (content) and having fun along the way (thoughtful and joyful process). Other meetups like the Annual Seed Harvesting and Processing day, the Annual Forum and the social opportunities like Stendhal, Artitude, was a gentle way to grow the group dynamic and share the expertise."* (Survey Respondent)

*"As a teacher I've been able to use lots of general information at school, as well as lectures I give at conferences."* (Survey Respondent)

*"If we share our learning then there's a lot of hassle new groups can avoid."* (Interviewee)

Interviewees consistently spoke about how the WhatsApp groups and platform has worked very well with careful curation keeping relationships alive when not meeting face to face.

*"The Seed Saving group is very active. The WhatsApp groups have been very warm spaces – you can just go on and ask a question and people will come back with something constructive. In our Belfast group there are different needs and expectations from just wanting to meet people to policy work. It's about managing all of these. But somehow everyone finds their place and doesn't feel diminished."* (Interviewee)

*"The WhatsApp group is great -so generous. People share if they find a funding source – even though they might be going for it themselves. You ask a question about bank accounts and people answer. It's there to ask questions."* (Interviewee)

*"Our WhatsApp group has worked really well – kept relationships alive as it's well curated."* (Co-Design Online Workshop)

The use of other online platforms was also noted.

*"The monthly zoom catch ups as a cluster were really helpful."* (Council Officer Interviewee)

Connecting to a bigger ‘whole’ and ‘picture’ is where you can observe the beginnings of the ‘new continent’. This was particularly important during the pandemic.

*“It has given us access to an important network, information and skills, and resources like seeds, fruit trees and the space to consider and integrate values like care, social justice, climate justice, and the power of the collective. Knowing our named SFG rep and them being available has been reassuring. I have also leaned on other SF&G members at different times thanks to the good bonds built up through the various events and projects. It was an invaluable link to the outside during the dislocated time of covid.”* (Survey Respondent)

*“First beginnings with SF&G was probably through seed saving projects and the Community Orchard projects. It was the first time our allotment holders got involved in something beyond themselves. Some of them find it easy to interact with others and some don’t. Relationships with SF&G helped bring them together and begin conversations.”* (Interviewee)

*“The SeedIt union is one example - the learning inputs were regular and accessible, the WhatsApp group allowed peer learning/ mistakes sharing, and each member of the SeedIt union responded in different ways, e.g. through sharing back various quantities of seeds at the end of the year - but this was never judged and whatever contribution members made even the most inexperienced was felt to be valued and all seed donations were part of a wider collective (not individual).”* (Survey Respondent)

*“Becoming a member of SF&G widening my thinking and made me realise that I don’t know everything.”* (Interviewee)

*“We got some funding for a water conservation project. Went to the Playtrail to see theirs. Got some folk over and we got it done with SF&G’s help. These things allow things to happen quicker – and that is so important if you want to hang onto volunteers. Things need to be fun, fast and fair.”* (Interviewee)

*“I have loved connecting with the other groups such as the Cabbage Patchers, Rathfriland Men’s Shed, Rostrevor. We are all worn out after Covid – connecting to others ‘tops me up’ for the next day and week. Resilience means opportunities for ‘topping up’ by others as I have to give so much of myself. We can all become stuck in a pattern and area of comfort – connecting with others pushes me to try something new, do something different. It feeds my soul.”* (Interviewee)

A few noted that connecting with others needs prioritised and resourced as well as the importance of expanding the networking map.

*“Networking and collaborating takes energy and effort. Someone needs to be there to make it happen otherwise we will retreat back into our little spaces. We can’t take it for granted that people know how to network.”* (Interviewee)

*“Joining the dots locally between entrepreneurs and sharing resources is also important. We need to expand our thinking beyond community groups and help local community businesses grow.”* (Interviewee)



### **Relationships with Decision Makers**

Many of those interviewed commented on the scale and range of SF&G's policy and campaigning work with a view that an all-island and UK dimension was vital.

*"I like the idea of fractals of life affirming patterns and building these up into a collective and strong voice influencing legislation and policy." (Interviewee)*

*"I have also been following what SF&G and Community Gardens Ireland have been doing and the reports produced by SF&G which have been important. I wonder could this advocacy side be articulated more explicitly, sharing updates and reports more regularly with members so that we know this side of the work is happening? I have a feeling that there is good work going on but not sure of the intersection between members informing this and feedback back to the members in terms of policy, papers, etc. being developed." (Survey Respondent)*

*"SF&G's campaigning role is so important and to have that all Ireland view as well as the UK." (Interviewee)*

The relationship between SF&G, community growing groups and Councils was referred to by both groups and Council interviewees.

*"SF&G needs to keep the Policy Influencers Network going – it has been very useful. Could sign up other officers across the Council and get the CEO to mandate this. It allows us to learn, share and get everyone on the same page." (Council Interviewee)*

*"There are a variety of levels of capacity, commitment and resilience across groups. Need tailored support for different needs. There is tension between groups and the Council – good to have a third party. Don't want to be seen as imposing a structure. Also to be aware of the cyclical nature of growing and groups – it's ok for things to stop and close." (Council Interviewee)*

People spoke to the advocacy power of the local clusters.

*The groups and clusters need to come together more to lobby the Council to take their responsibilities seriously and start understanding the importance of community growing." (Interviewee)*

*"How do we in this area collectively gather and harvest our learning over the last 5 years and share it with the wider community? What are the seeds that we want to store for the next chapter? Could we pull together an exhibition of photos and visuals and place them in a public space? Create a tapestry? Poem?." (Interviewee)*

The Benchmark Report was seen as an important piece of work that was just beginning.

*"I am hoping that SF&G's Benchmark Report will be named and adopted as part of next year's Corporate Plan. It fits so well in our wider direction of travel around community asset transfer, climate adaptation and mitigation, Sustainable Food Partnership, procurement, health and wellbeing." (Council Officer Interviewee)*

*“If my Council could have a Community Growing Strategy it would touch so much – we have a solid foundation, research, and a framework. It links to climate/sustainability/food. We need this standard and timeline. Key issue is getting agreement and buy-in from all relevant departments in Council. Working out the best home which is probably climate and resilience. Need particular buy in from city/neighbourhoods’ teams that do the practical work. There is tension between policy/strategy and what happens on the ground. SF&G need to use the committee structures in Council to gain legitimacy. Get the CEO and officers on board and work out which departments to bring on board. Get it in the business plan and link to statutory outputs.” (Council Interviewee)*

*I presented the Benchmark Report to the Community Officer in the Council – he had never heard of it and had passed it onto the guys in Parks etc. I feel that the little network that has grown (all different kinds of growing spaces and levels of confidence, skills sets and priorities) could have strength in collective voice and begin engaging with the Council to prioritise community growing and pass a motion with regards to a strategy. (Interviewee)*

Council interviewees spoke to locating community growing within a wider Land Use Framework and Climate Breakdown.

*“The role of the local authority is to adopt, endorse and support and remove the obstacles for communities to make things happen. We need to link this to land management strategy – unlock land for use. Don’t just see land as asset management. Other landowners also need to be part of this conversation. We need a proper land use management strategy and resolve the tension between best value for rate payers and unlocking land for communities.” (Council Interviewee)*

*“It’s great being in the climate change area – as it’s clear we cannot keep doing business as usual. Need to break the shifting of blame from policy to operational. We are each stuck in our narratives. Need to be safe to fail. Linking it all to climate is a positive way of getting attention. Things are moving so fast in climate change – people don’t want to be left behind. It’s a good framing for SF&G’s next chapter.” (Council Interviewee)*

*“At the moment we are going after the easy stuff in climate – we need a social infrastructure and response, not just technological. We are so focused on carbon – but we should also be building community resilience in which community growing sits. This means building relationships between groups, growing the sector and the collective voice.” (Council Interviewee)*

A few of the community growers interviewed reflected on the brokerage function of SF&G with Councils and other decision makers.

*“Apart from the network of community growers and the wider membership that we have had the chance to interact with over the last few years, I have had limited interaction (thankfully) with some of these other stakeholders. As someone quite sceptical of how statutory can sometimes be in their engagement with the*

*community, it was a relief to know that SF&G could do the work of advocating, occupying the space that was needed to represent the voice of this important sector, and inviting in the wider network in thoughtful ways.” (Survey Respondent)*

*“The network members collaborated to write a letter to Newry Mourne and Down Council to explain how the council could better support community growers, in terms of funding, access to land, and other considerations. As a result of this letter, and work done by the network members, the network has been asked to take a place on the council’s Strategic Stakeholders Forum, a CVS representative body that feeds into community planning processes.” (Project Report 2020-21)*

*“They definitely have a role in brokering relationships with statutory agencies and decision makers. Forcing them to hear us/listen to us as ‘grassroots’ volunteers.” (Interviewee)*

One notable success amongst one cluster was the group-working on access to bulk materials.

*Following repeated difficulties for individual gardens, we undertook a negotiating process with the city council and the Growing Resilience cluster to access the Council’s Green Waste Compost buyback. Ballymagowan allotments were able to host the delivery, and Greenfingers Allotments, Bunscoil Cholmcille, St Columb’s Park House, Inspire Wellbeing and the Rathmor Gairdín Pobail all received several ton bags each at delivery cost only. This has set a useful precedent, as previously council has only granted this to its own allotments. Following on from this we made approaches to a local landscaping firm, and we were also able to get 20 tons of free woodchip and bark mulch and distribute this to 3 of the community gardens in the city – Greenfingers @ the Playtrail, St Columb’s Park House and the Pat Mulkeen Community Garden (Creggan). (Project Report 2020-21)*



Outcome Challenge 3 More resilient growing spaces	
3.1 Soil Health	-A 'No Dig' Juicy Bed Demonstration in Fermanagh & Omagh DC area. <a href="https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=656916935082938">https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=656916935082938</a>
3.2 Seeds Saving	-23 000 seeds of 40 different varieties were successfully saved at a gathering of the participant gardens bringing themselves, their seeds, and their stories to the table. 16 of the gardens that took part were represented on the day – a further 5 sent in their seeds but were unable to attend in person.
3.3 Composting	-The Science of Composting <a href="https://youtu.be/sbBZhclv-cE">https://youtu.be/sbBZhclv-cE</a> Making Compost <a href="https://youtu.be/bgWhed_VwsE">https://youtu.be/bgWhed_VwsE</a>
3.4 Cross Border Bio-Region	-The collaboration and joint events with Community Gardens Ireland. Community Gardens Ireland were jointly awarded a grant of 10000 euro by the Community Foundation of Ireland to work together with SF&G in NI on learning from each other's experiences and processes, mapping their members and resources, and forging stronger cross-border linkages.

The resilience and health of the soil, water and air needs recognized alongside the resilience of communities. And the understanding of 'community' requires a reframing to include the rest of the natural world.

*"We learned new ways to grow and adapt our current growing to be more sustainable." (Survey Respondent)*

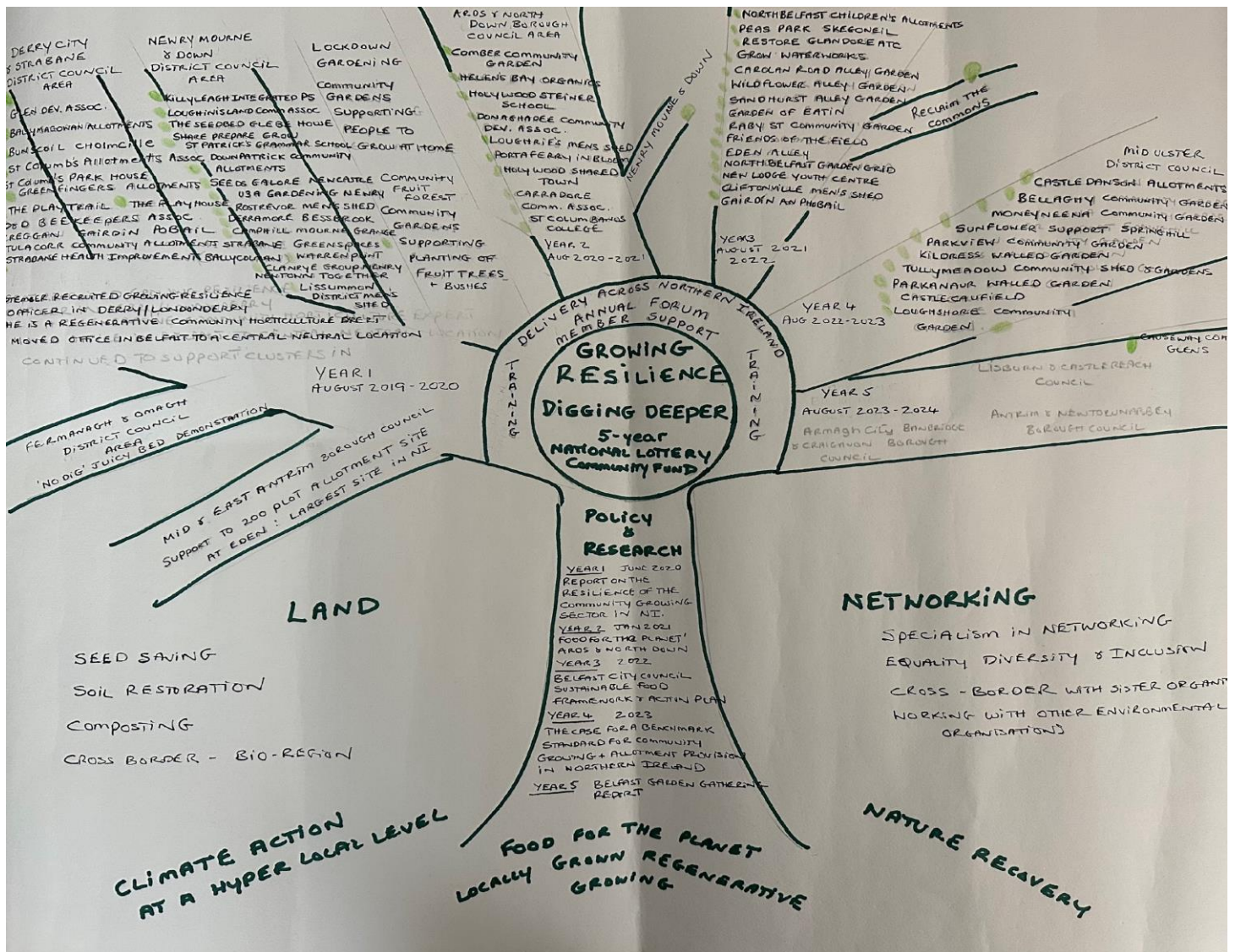




### 5.3 Addressing the three key themes

This section offers commentary as to how the project has addressed the three key themes underpinning the People and Communities Programme – people led, strengths-based and connected. Previous sections have spoken to these themes as well. This section draws principally from annual reports. It is also important to note the pandemic shaped the first two years of the project which changed the allocation of resources, priorities and the medium of delivery.

The sketch below is the team’s mapping of the extent and range of their work across the four years with the 5<sup>th</sup> Year’s forecast.





## People-led

The original application envisaged clusters of 4 - 6 groups in each Council area. However, the clusters all became larger especially in the urban areas of Belfast and Derry as can be seen from the sketch above. This meant more growing groups were able to take part, but it also meant longer periods were needed to visit the different sites and grow relationships within each cluster. The pace changed as did the level of resources required from staff and the expansion of time frames because it is a People-Led project.

With the establishment of each cluster there followed skills-based meetups and workshops hosted by and shaped by member groups weaving relationships of support and connections.

At the 2023 NI Annual Forum and Gathering at the Playtrail in Derry, participants were asked if SF&G were an animal, what would it be? They were asked to sketch out the animal and explain why they chose it. There was an impressive range of four legged and two legged creatures chosen. For example:

**Honeybee** - as SF&G works hard building a structure, like a hive, that keeps us connected

**Octopus** – as it has many tentacles that can outstretch all over

**Frog** – as it goes through cycles of life and knows when it is the right time to do something. It can also survive and thrive in different environments

**Owl** – knowledgeable and calm. First to turn to in moments of crises

**Stag** – strong

**Spiders** – sensitive to movements and responds appropriately, building a web

**Turtle** – slow moving and will get there in the end. It puts in a lot of effort and has a long life

**Elephant** – long memories and never forgets people, histories and what has worked and not worked

**Pig** – provides us with enough sustenance for the year

**Fox** - treading carefully and sensitively with full awareness of the environment

**Ants** – working together

**Lion** – Strength, determination and leadership

**Hare** – Fast mover when required. Only seen in the wild and natural spaces

**Camel** – Has great reserves

The animals and explanations spoke to the strengths and capacities of this small team and their responsiveness to individual and group needs.

Evaluation of Growing Resilience: Digging Deeper



Annual Forum 2023 in the Straw Bale House, the Playtrail, Derry/Londonderry



## Building on People's Strengths

This was evidenced very clearly during the pandemic, when SF&G helped volunteers see that their skills of organisation, planning and growing plants from seed were what was needed at this time to bring hope and positive activity to them in a time of great stress and worry. By providing them with the seeds, compost and pots and a structure to get these out to people, the gardens were able to achieve great things in a short space of time, even those with members working from home or isolating. SF&G encouraged people to create their own videos of what they were doing at home or in their community gardens and share them with others. The site visits and skill shares were based on building on people's strengths and sharing them. The benefit of SF&G work is in connecting people with each other to form mutual support and aid networks, and in this way, constantly affirmed people's generosity and willingness to support other people in their community work. (TNL 2019-20)



Seed Saving The Playtrail Derry October 2023

## Building and Strengthening Connections

*“Conversations about food naturally move into conversations about the kind of places we want to live in, what we want for children and grandchildren and fairness. How can we continue to knit together what we are learning in the community garden with the work of other community development groups.” (Interviewee)*

As previously mentioned, this project was informed by social capital theory and the three spheres of relationship building: bonding, bridging, and linking. With regards 'bonding' there is a challenge with regards the demography of many growing groups and how they cross the inter-generational divisions that exist in many communities. There are some great examples

of invitation to people within the refugee and asylum-seeking system with an understanding that creating an inclusive space requires thoughtfulness, support and knowledge building.

This report has spoken extensively about the 'linking' and 'networking' dimension of the project, placing it within a wider understanding of systems change.

The 'linking' or policy and advocacy work has been a very successful and growing area of work not reflected in the original application. Strategic support is needed to secure more land for community growing with SF&G advocating for community growing to be built into local development plans, community plans and the corporate plans of land-owning public bodies. This requires 'close listening relationships' between growers and policy makers.<sup>18</sup>

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 the UK and Europe.

*"The sector is achieving so much and is well loved. But it is also precarious. Funding is short term and hard won, with many grants not contributing to staff or core costs. Land is not owned by the groups using it, and the quality of tenancy agreement varies. Encouragement for groups to develop social enterprises only works out for some groups and can be an unrealistic or unsuitable aim for others. The move to providing more healthcare in the community could place even more stress on the sector if not properly resourced and supported."*<sup>19</sup>

## **Two other important themes to note:**

### **Levering Other Work and Opportunities**

SF&G have been very successful at using their TNLCF funding to lever in other resources and opportunities amounting to £160k. For example, SF&G was written into a funding application by the Derry City & Strabane District Council to take on the role of allocation of annual funding to Council allotments and growing projects over three years.

The team also won a tender from Ards & North Down Council to 'Establish a Sustainable Food Community focused on people's access to healthy, affordable, and sustainable food that increases community resilience and reduces food poverty'. They delivered the 'Food for the Planet' contract for this Council November 2021 – March 2022, which increased the membership of the Growing Resilience Cluster. Support was given as part of the funding for a successful funding application for the Council to Sustainable Food Places attracting additional funding for work on sustainable food. SF&G were able to use the Participatory Budgeting model to distribute micro-grants for Community Growing on behalf of the

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<sup>18</sup> Reclaim the Commons p.16

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/sites/farmgarden.org.uk/files/sfg\\_report\\_-\\_the\\_resilience\\_of\\_the\\_community\\_growing\\_sector\\_in\\_northern\\_ireland\\_0.pdf](https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/sites/farmgarden.org.uk/files/sfg_report_-_the_resilience_of_the_community_growing_sector_in_northern_ireland_0.pdf)

Council. SF&G were in a position to deliver this contract because of their work in the area on Growing Resilience: Digging Deeper.

SF&G put together a research team to review and write 'Belfast City's Sustainable Food Framework and Action Plan' commissioned by Belfast City Council's Climate Commission office. The team consisted of Miriam Turley (Lead) and Patricia Wallace from Social Farms & Gardens, Beth Bell Food Ethics expert and Dr Sinead Furey UU Food Poverty expert. Although an intense piece of work with over 40 expert witnesses to interview and a real-life food web event organised with food growers, producers, distributors, and citizens alongside statutory and voluntary organisations with responsibilities for food, it was a very beneficial piece of work in building strong relationships with the climate team and Belfast City Council. This work would not have been possible without the Growing Resilience networking experience. SF&G's work supported the Council to become members of Sustainable Food Places and attracted additional funding to the Council for this work.

### **The Platform during the Covid Pandemic**

The pandemic was the backdrop to the Growing Resilience Project's first two years. The agility and creativity of a small team meant that they were able to adapt quickly and effectively.

*"We have had successful online meetings of the Northwest Growing Resilience cluster, and Newry Mourne and Down Cluster, where participating groups were able to connect directly with each other and explore commonalities, avenues for future collaborations and plan for Live Meetups in September 2020." (Project Report 2019-20)*

*"We held our Annual Forum event via Zoom on the Summer Solstice 20<sup>th</sup> June 2020. We put all our social media skills into it – Sharing screens, Break out rooms, Live Streaming on location in Derry/Londonderry from the Playtrail and the Bunscoil (Irish Primary School). We discussed the current Covid 19 circumstances - the easing of Lockdown, requirements for reopening and the challenges and opportunities for the community growing sector. The Incredible Edible Forest Trail was officially launched with Marian Farrell founder explaining the initiative. Maeve O'Neill from Zero Waste NW gave an energetic speech as our keynote speaker on the group's actions and success with Derry City and Strabane Council being the first council to commit to Zero Waste in Northern Ireland. We had breakout discussions and networking opportunities." (Project Report 2019-20)*

*"During the recent Covid 19 crisis small community growing groups around Northern Ireland were quick to respond, safely and effectively, to the needs of their communities. They led the way in diversifying their activities, providing food delivery to the vulnerable and isolated, checking in on neighbours through phone- round schemes, and later on in lockdown encouraging their neighbours to grow at home, so that fresh food is still being provided locally. Indeed, the rise in interest in growing at*



*home has been a positive feature of the crisis and could characterise the “new normal” after lockdown.”<sup>20</sup>*

The groups that were the most resilient and best able to adapt and respond quickly to the situation were the ones that had strong infrastructure in place: secure access to land and control of decision-making processes, core funding or funding that could be repurposed, and strong core staff and volunteer teams.<sup>21</sup> This learning needs incorporated into thinking about the necessary social infrastructure for climate resiliency.



**Musicians at Grow Community Garden Belfast, community run on Belfast City Council land**

<sup>20</sup> ([https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/sites/farmgarden.org.uk/files/sfg\\_report\\_-\\_the\\_resilience\\_of\\_the\\_community\\_growing\\_sector\\_in\\_northern\\_ireland\\_0.pdf](https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/sites/farmgarden.org.uk/files/sfg_report_-_the_resilience_of_the_community_growing_sector_in_northern_ireland_0.pdf))

<sup>21</sup> ([https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/sites/farmgarden.org.uk/files/sfg\\_report\\_-\\_the\\_resilience\\_of\\_the\\_community\\_growing\\_sector\\_in\\_northern\\_ireland\\_0.pdf](https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/sites/farmgarden.org.uk/files/sfg_report_-_the_resilience_of_the_community_growing_sector_in_northern_ireland_0.pdf))

## 6.Challenges

### **Total change of context**

In the first year of this 5 year project (August 2019 – August 2024) the UK went into a series of Lockdowns because of the Covid 19 pandemic (March 2020 – July 2021). SF&G met this challenge head on, helping community gardens to be resilient and to support their communities to be resilient in a time of crisis. SF&G quickly moved their networking activities on-line – March 2020, were successful in attracting Covid Uplift funding from TNLCF and with the help of field workers and key volunteers ensured community gardens were active and had seeds, plants, fruit bushes and trees to distribute to their communities.

“It was an uplifting activity at a bleak time” participant

“People found comfort in reconnecting with nature and maybe for the first time grew their own food. We were busier than ever.” Staff member

### **Delivery of the Project with rise in the number of Community Growing groups**

The original application referred to a 1-year relationship with a Council area cluster. The team quickly realised that this was not realistic in the context of Covid Lockdowns and also with the substantial rise in the number and type of community growing projects. There were many more groups in the urban areas than the original model of 6 – 8 groups per cluster. Clusters varied from 10 – 34 groups. In some cases, it took 18-24 months to establish a local network and then the relationship needed to be sustained by SF&G. SF&G were stretching their own capacity and resilience to support the growing number of cluster groups. SF&G made the decision early to allow more time for larger clusters and to have several clusters within some of the urban areas for example in Belfast – the Belfast Alleyways Network and the Reclaim the Commons group, a collective of community growing spaces both in the Belfast Council Area together covering 34 groups. In some Council areas SF&G were responsive to the needs of the area for example in Mid & East Antrim SF&G helped establish a Field Representative System for the Council at the Eden Allotments (the largest allotment site in NI with 200 plots) and have provided support to the system across all four years and this will continue to August 2024. Groups across NI have benefitted from themed clusters on Lockdown Gardening and Community Fruit Forests, No Dig gardening, Social & Therapeutic Gardening and SF&G’s Annual Forums and policy work. SF&G involved all 11 Councils in co-designing the Benchmark Standard for Community Growing and Allotment Provision.

### **Resilience of the SF&G NI Team**

The SF&G team have found themselves stretched to capacity with the rapid expansion of community growing projects. SF&G have successfully used Field Workers and key volunteers to help with delivery, they have managed to be agile, flexible and manage their time well. This is challenging when mirrored across the sector with community garden coordinators meeting multiple needs of communities on a cocktail of funding, often unpaid or underpaid. The team were acutely aware that they were fortunate to have Lottery Funding over a period of multiple crises – Brexit, the Pandemic and Cost of Living. They stepped up and beyond during and since Covid 19 increasing their hours of work when needed.

## 7. Looking to the Future – The Next Chapter

### 7.1 Reflections and Conclusions

#### Context

Internationally, the evidence-based benefits of community gardens are many, from the proven physical, mental, health and well-being benefits to educational, environmental, cultural, and social gains. There is evidence that they hugely increase social capital by encouraging active citizenship and social connection, help reduce health inequalities, and contribute to reducing anti-social behaviour, thus making communities safer.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the proven benefits, Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK (apart from London) that does not have statutory allotment or community growing space provision in place. Apart from a small number of local authorities, a low priority has been placed on green infrastructure until very recently. Hence access to land is a real issue for communities wishing to grow food.<sup>23</sup>

The following brief reflections are framed using three different areas of storytelling as changing the stories we tell ourselves is usually the first step in political change. Every conflict is in part a battle over the story we tell, or who tells and who is heard.<sup>24</sup>

#### The Under Stories

The Growing Resilience Project was all about relationships and yet relationships and networks are rarely visible, whether in the soil or in communities, but they shape everything that is possible. We often talk about relationships being common sense but not common practice. The Relationships Project has identified a few key reasons behind this:

- 1. Whilst many of us intuitively believe that everything works better when relationships are valued, we've created systems and protocols and cultural norms which actively get in the way of relationship building.*
- 2. When we think about working in ways that are relational, we often see it as being something of an exclusive personality trait. Whilst it's certainly true that relationship building comes more easily to some, we also think it's something that can be supported, nurtured and enabled, or something that can be discouraged, belittled and obstructed.*
- 3. Relationships are often seen as a 'frilly extra'; a 'nice to have' that creates a friendlier working environment but which, ultimately, comes second (or third or fourth) to the 'bottom line'. We disagree. We believe that relationships are the way in which other*

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<sup>22</sup> Shostak, S., & Guscott, N. (2017). Grounded in the neighbourhood, grounded in community: Social capital and health in community gardens. In Food systems and health, 199-222. Emerald publishing ltd.

<sup>23</sup> [http://cgireland.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Community-Gardens-Ireland\\_Lets-Get-Growing.pdf](http://cgireland.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Community-Gardens-Ireland_Lets-Get-Growing.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Solnit, R. (2016) Hope in the dark: untold histories, wild possibilities, London: Cannongate

*outcomes are realised – from better health and educational outcomes to improved wellbeing and stronger communities.*<sup>25</sup>

This project understood, embodied and practised that relationships are the ‘bottom line’ in terms of our wellbeing as people and our ability to feed ourselves and thrive on a living planet.

### **Our Stories**

This report has tried to include extracts of stories and reflections from only some of the people who’ve been part of this project, the value of their piece of land allowing them agency from where they are standing, and the role of SF&G in removing obstacles, giving confidence, and bringing people together to be part of a bigger ‘whole’. The powerful comment that we must all heed is ‘who is still on mute’ in this community, why and what could we do about it. And how do we start to understand that our stories as people are entangled with the stories of the non-human species around us.

### **The Over Stories**

Governments around the world are slowly and finally beginning to make structural commitments around the provision of energy, transport, housing, our economy, and buildings that will be there for 100s of years recognizing that we have come to the end of a 400-year cycle in terms of how our world has been built and imagined.

*“Engaging Local Councils in NI to reimagine possibilities for public land has been one of the most significant achievements of community land use advocates in recent decades. The work of Social Farms & Gardens in NI has subtly engaged local government to consider bigger picture opportunities, opportunities that are taking shape in the emergence of social farms and community gardens, adding support for collective ownership to sit alongside the tradition of allotment growing. A new narrative is beginning to take shape and play out. Public bodies are considering the social value their assets present to fulfil policy objectives concerned with personal health and wellbeing. New forms of community organising are visible across our villages, towns and cities covering large heritage landscape management to support the most marginalised in our society with access to social farms & gardens.”*<sup>26</sup>

One Council (Ards & North Down) has an operating community growing strategy, and four Councils (Derry City and Strabane Council, Mid & East Antrim Council (M& EA) Belfast Council, and Newry Mourne & Down Council) have draft strategies, although two of these (Belfast and M&EA) have been in draft for over 10 years. Belfast is in the process of setting a target for community growing provision, other Councils have yet to do so. The NM&D strategy is not solely on community growing but includes community growing as part of its (draft) Sustainability strategy.

Philanthropies and funders have begun to recognize that long term investment in system change, and transitioning is a necessary response to climate breakdown. The investment in

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<sup>25</sup> <https://relationshipsproject.org/a-framework-for-rcp/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/community-growing-benchmark-northern-ireland>

SF&G NI has allowed them to deepen and broaden the relationships required on the land, with people and with decision makers to begin shifting the dial.

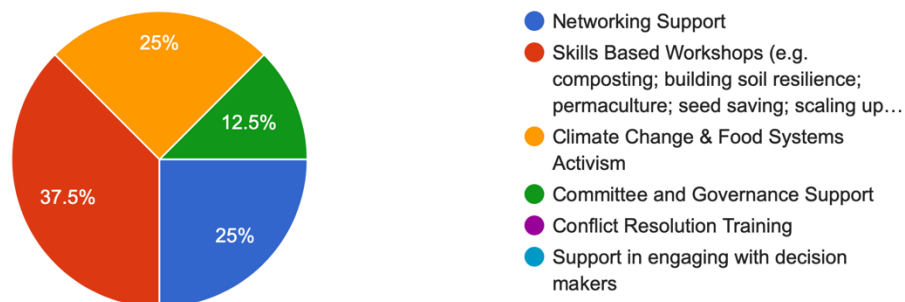
## Conclusions

The Growing Resilience Project has without doubt been value for money for TNLCF and more than met the programme's core priorities. The team steered, adapted and delivered the project while responding to societal crises and groups' needs. The SF&G team purposely kept itself small to avoid competing with its wider membership with a flexibility that allowed the staff to decrease or increase hours depending on workloads. As a small team, the staff have achieved a formidable amount of work in incredibly challenging times with the project beginning six months before lockdown. It is also impressive that they levered in another £160k in addition to the Lottery grant for specialist research and areas of work.

The team has grown its skill set and areas of work providing best practice to the sector in land-based community development and networking. They have supported groups make sense of climate breakdown and what they can do from where they are standing and growing. The focus on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion has also contributed to growing groups becoming more resilient and relevant to the shifting demographics and needs across many communities. The team have brought experience best practice to Northern Ireland from UK, and Ireland and have in turn shared their knowledge and learning across UK and Ireland.

## 7.2 Recommendations – Shifting the Dial

Q. 11 What do you think should form part of the 'next chapter'?



Respondents to the survey prioritised four dimensions of practice:

- Recognizing that the health and resilience of the group is the foundation of everything through committee and governance support.
- Becoming a better steward of the land through growing skills and knowledge in land-based community development.
- Understanding that they are part of building a new story through investing in relationship building across groups and localities creating more porous borders.
- Clearly placing their work within the bigger story of climate change and resilient food systems.



## Recommendations

Below are recommendations for SF&G's next chapter of their story with an overall recommendation to secure funding to sustain the organisation's role in community led climate and ecological justice work in Northern Ireland.

### 1.Sustain the Connectivity

*"We built thousands of little bridges which connected us outside of our usual bubbles. These bridges are powerful things - they're the infrastructure of new friendships and, in aggregate, the engineering of stronger, more resilient communities."* <sup>27</sup>

#### Grow the Physical Support Platform

- Secure the Core Team: With the role of sharing specialised growing knowledge, policy and advocacy work and supporting Field Workers.
- Grow the Field Workers team with their focus on the long-term work of growing local relationships, mapping and keeping a live database of local groups working with autonomy and flexibility.
- Develop the resource library of Templates, Tools and Practice in community growing, land-based community development and land stewardship.

### 2. Systems Change

#### Community Informed & Led Advocacy

- There is a critical piece of work to be done holding councils and other public landowners to the 'growing space' standard and giving power to communities.

### 3.New Stories

#### Support the use of creative mediums in the 'growing spaces' to tell exciting, compelling and innovative new stories about

- a regenerative food system
- a well-being economic system
- restoration and recovery of nature
- equal, inclusive and diverse communities
- building social and environmental justice

### 4.Blend the Physical and the Digital

#### Online Hub

- To find the right balance between the digital and the physical. The necessity of the pandemic has accelerated progress, but we need to build on this fast learning and

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<sup>27</sup> <https://relationshipsproject.org/a-framework-for-rcp/>

develop the use of online citizenship, not to replace face to face but to enhance and complement it.

“Tech where it matters. People where it counts.”

- Develop a digital infrastructure for policy and advocacy and campaigns.

#### **5. Notice who is still on mute**

- Deepen the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion work ensuring that climate change mitigation and adaptation is a just one.
- Deliver the Growing Resilience: Digging Deeper cluster model where groups and Councils want it.

#### **6. Devolution & Accountability**

- Explore models of devolving decision making and resources to local areas.

#### **7. Future Generations**

- Invest in succession planning and the mutual sharing of old and new skills across the generations. Focus on inter-generational divisions and equity as a core priority.
- Continue and grow the Seed Saving work.
- Practice and promote Participatory Budgeting

#### **8. Resilient Organisation**

- Evolve into the ‘next chapter’ organisation which is practising resilience internally.

*“Most of us perceive soil as dead and passive substrate: a tabula rasa that achieves its purpose and potential only when crops are standing in it. We imagine that its role in producing food is confined to anchoring the roots of plants and absorbing the synthetic chemicals we apply. If we encounter its life forms, we tend to react with horror and call them disgusting. If we want to insult someone gravely, we might describe them as a worm: an animal on which, perhaps above all others, our lives depend. But understanding it is crucial to addressing some of the greatest questions that confront us: how we might feed ourselves in world whose natural and human systems are changing at astonishing speed, how might we do so without destroying the basis of our subsistence and how we might, while securing our own survival, protect the rest of life on Earth. The future lies underground.”<sup>28</sup>*

### **The future lies underground**

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<sup>28</sup> Monbiot, G., (2022) Regeneration – Feeding the World Without Devouring the Planet, p. 26

## **Appendix – People Interviewed**

1. Rostrevor Community Garden volunteers
2. Marie Kelly - Hilltown Social Farm
3. Donna Bates – Killyleagh Community Garden
4. Rodney McBride – Newry Mourne & Down Council
5. Joanne Boal- Rainbow Alley
6. Suzi Miller – Peas Park (Belfast)
7. Aisling Pugsley – Cavehill PS Community Garden (Belfast)
8. Shauna Scullion – Sunflower Support NI (Mid-Ulster)
9. Denise Kelso – Sandholes Community Garden (Mid-Ulster)
10. Roisin O’Donnell– Bunscoil Cholmcille (Derry)
11. Kevin Campbell – Ballymagowan Allotments (Derry)
14. Mark Roberts– Playtrail (Derry)
15. Allan Bogle – Derry City and Strabane District Council
16. Orlaigh Sally - Omagh
17. Mura Quigley – Belfast City Council
18. Grainne McCloskey – NI Eden Project
19. Kelly Hann – Field Worker Social Farms & Gardens

### **And Social Farms & Gardens Staff Team**

Miriam Turley – Senior Growing Resilience Officer and Policy & Resource Officer

Conor O’Kane – Growing Resilience Officer Northwest and Regenerative Community Horticulturalist

Patricia Wallace – NI Manager Social Farms & Gardens

This Evaluation was prepared by Karin Eyben of the Hare’s Corner Collective who worked alongside the SF&G team from June 2023 – February 2024

### **Hare’s Corner Collective**

An inter-generational support platform for makers, creators, educators, facilitators and dreamers to do what we love with care of people and the natural world.