

Report on	Mid Ulster is Growing from Home Project
Date of Meeting	7 th July 2020
Reporting Officer	Raymond Lowry, Head of Technical Services

Is this report restricted for confidential business?	Yes	
If 'Yes', confirm below the exempt information category relied upon	No	X

1.0	Purpose of Report
1.1	To update members on the 'Mid Ulster is Growing from Home' project.
2.0	Background
2.1	As one of the main priorities for Council's sustainability programme Mid Ulster District Council has been actively supporting the development of community run allotments and food growing projects across the district on an ongoing basis with many local gardening groups participating in the workshops and events offered to them. The programme contributes successfully to developing and maintaining a vibrant community food gardening sector in the district with many of the gardening groups doing very well in terms of numbers involved, food produced and new skills learnt.
2.2.	External funding secured from the Northern Healthy Lifestyles Partnership added to the number of events we could run and has provided an additional focus on wellbeing & improvement of mental & physical health through gardening.
2.3	Over the years the Sustainability Officer has actively supported and advised a number of new groups on how to set up or further develop/maintain their food gardens/allotments projects. Usually this would take place in conjunction with a site visit to the group's garden/communal area or, on request, Council would help groups organise/run an introductory session (e.g. seed sowing morning/planting session, etc.) to raise awareness and create interest within their community.
2.4	Through a longstanding partnership with The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) the Council and TCV have jointly supported several allotments/garden groups through regular practical sessions and tailored workshops in order to build up their gardening skills and capacities. In addition a number of bigger networking events have been organised every year, involving participations from several groups in a certain area. Some educational events also took place at the three Council operated allotment sites in Dungannon, Ballygawley, and Castledawson to increase community involvement at these sites.
2.5	Since March any of these communal events and activities have been put on hold due to Coronavirus.

3.0	Main Report
3.1	With the current Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions in place Council's Sustainability function responded quickly and set up the 'Mid Ulster is growing from Home' project at the end of March. Since then the project has been successful in providing ongoing support and guidance to Mid Ulster's community gardening & allotment groups as well as individual residents during the coronavirus pandemic and has helped them to grow some fresh food on their own at home during these difficult times.
3.2	The support given is entirely via electronic communication and consists of weekly emails on various food growing and gardening activities at home to accompany the participating gardeners through this growing season. There is no need to go out anywhere to do these activities and while people may not have had a great supply of seeds, equipment, horticultural supplies or even space, the project helped them to overcome these problems and do some gardening at home.
3.3	The themes covered take into consideration the time of year, current weather conditions and timing (e.g. what to sow when) as we have been going through the growing season and have also taken account of the particular situation everyone was facing i.e. people having to garden at home which might be very limited in space and open ground (making use of back yards, window sills, pots, etc.) and they may not actually have had much resources (in terms of seeds, soil/compost, tools, seeds trays, money, etc.). Participating gardeners are welcome to email back their ideas/gardening tips/photos of their gardens, etc. to share with the group, ask questions and suggest topics and their lively feedback has helped to tailor the contents of the weekly emails and guidance sheets.
3.4	<p>Realising the wider community interest and potential to expand our outreach the scheme was quickly opened beyond the initial target groups. Participants don't have to be a skilled gardener or belong to a gardening group, all Mid Ulster residents can take part, simply by requesting to have their email address added to the mailing list and start growing some fresh food - even if it's just a few salad leaves or herbs on the window sill. To create awareness among local residents and encourage them to join the home growing project information about the scheme was posted on a number of occasions on social media by Council's communication team and also published on the Council website – the Facebook posts in particular resulted in a fantastic response and enthusiasm from local people interested in growing fruit & veg during lockdown. Council staff were also invited to participate in the home growing activities.</p> <p>By now the Council has over 200 home gardeners on the project mailing list with a lot of newcomers to gardening, but also many experienced growers and among these we have a number of people from gardening or allotment groups who will forward the guidance to their members too.</p>

3.5	<p>The 'Mid Ulster is growing from Home' project has so far covered the following topics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Introduction & Planting Garlic followed by guidance on • 'Planting Potatoes' • 'Growing Herbs' • 'Sowing into Seed Trays' • 'Creating a vegetable plot in your garden' • 'Container growing' • 'Growing vegetables from groceries' • 'Growing on' seedlings and young plants • 'Growing flowers & attracting pollinators' • 'Taking Stock' • 'Growing a few super fruits' • 'Seed Saving' • 'Harvesting & Eating' <p>All above info available as PDF files and further topics will be added throughout the 2020 growing season. (Please see a few examples enclosed in the APPENDICES 1-5)</p>
3.6	<p>Feedback</p> <p>As continued high participation numbers and extremely positive feedback show the project has been a great encouragement and distraction for people struggling with isolating at home and has successfully helped many local residents to learn new gardening skills, become more self-reliant, and feel part of a wider gardening community. Participants are often amazed at their own success, sending in photos of their vegetable gardens and variety of crops harvested so far. They also mention the benefits of involving their children into the gardening activities and how they enjoy using re-cycled materials and making use of left-over seeds and raising plants from shop bought groceries. Increasingly people also report back of their joy to be able to share some of their home-grown vegetables with their neighbours.</p>
3.7	<p>Outlook</p> <p>Evidence from our own project, as well as similar reports from other organisations and the media, demonstrates that there has been a great uptake of gardening and food growing at home during the lockdown. Large numbers of people have turned to their own gardens to learn new skills, remain physical active and support their mental wellbeing during a phase of social isolation and crisis. Many of these newcomers to gardening would not have been active members of community gardening groups or allotments; some might want to join community gardening activities in the future, others may choose to keep gardening at home as part of their new 'normal'. These changes in habits towards healthier lifestyles can hopefully be maintained beyond the current crisis - especially if given a little bit of additional support in terms of resources and skills. A number of home growers are sheltering and deserve particular support to ensure that they can actually access the health & wellbeing activities offered within their communities.</p>

	It is planned to keep the project going throughout this growing season while adapting to changing circumstances which hopefully will allow us to re-introduce some elements of communal activities in the future in line with any further easing of restrictions and government guidelines.
4.0	Other Considerations
4.1	Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications
	Financial: None, project might lead to further opportunities to apply for external grants.
	Human: Considerable time commitment by Sustainability Officer
	Risk Management: Project put in place to ensure continuation of community food growing support during lockdown in line with government rules & restrictions.
4.2	Screening & Impact Assessments
	Equality & Good Relations Implications: None – open to all residents, catering for all abilities and social/economic backgrounds.
	Rural Needs Implications: None
5.0	Recommendation(s)
5.1	Members to note the content of the report for information purposes on work being carried out by the Sustainability Officer.
6.0	Documents Attached & References
	Examples of project guidance sheets:
6.1	Appendix 1 – Mid Ulster is Growing form home intro
6.2	Appendix 2 - Sowing into Seed Trays'
6.3	Appendix 3 - Container Growing'
6.4	Appendix 4 - Growing Flowers & Attracting Pollinators'
6.5	Appendix 5 - Harvesting & Eating'