

Report on	Completion of Mid Ulster is Growing from Home Project
Date of Meeting	10 th November 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 completion of Council's 'Mid Ulster is Growing from Home' project and highlight the results of the End of Summer Virtual Show held as part of the project.
2.0	Background
2.1	Earlier this year, in response to the unexpected challenges posed by the Corona pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions, MUDC set up the 'Mid Ulster is growing from Home' project, which has been successfully running since the end of March as part of Council's district wide sustainability programme.
2.2.	The project has been successful in providing ongoing support and guidance to Mid Ulster's community gardening & allotment groups as many of them had to stop their regular group activities and were faced with the problem of how to keep their gardens going and their members motivated. Furthermore, the scheme attracted great interest among individual residents to start gardening and has helped them to grow fresh fruit and vegetables on their own at home during these difficult times.
3.0	Main Report
3.1	Since March the project has been growing incredibly strong with over 200 enthusiastic participants of all ages on board and has covered a multitude of topics from seed sowing, setting up vegetable patches, planting spuds, container planting, fruit & herb growing to late summer sowing, seed saving, harvesting and eating tips with lively feedback via photos/comments from participants a vital element of the project.
3.2	Important elements of the scheme were also to encourage the re-use of resources and wildlife friendly growing, avoiding the use of chemicals and making do with what's available.
3.3	The continuous support provided by Sustainability Officer has been mainly in the form of weekly emails with information sheets on various food growing and gardening activities at home to accompany the participating gardeners through

	this growing season.
3.4	In addition, late summer sowing packs, funded by the Northern Healthy Lifestyles Partnership were sent out to 75 participants to provide them with additional vegetable seeds and information to extend their growing season. A summer sowing clinic for a limited number of gardeners with all necessary health & safety arrangements in place was held in conjunction with TCV at Castledawson allotments in August.
3.5	To provide a finishing highlight to the project and provide everyone involved with an opportunity to show off what they have achieved over the last 6 months Council's Sustainability Officer organised an ' End of Summer Virtual Show ' during the month of September, supported by TCV and Council's Biodiversity Officer.
3.6	The virtual show has been a great success with 130 entries received, showing a huge variety, high quality and impressive quantity of fruit and vegetables grown by local households across Mid Ulster this year. Furthermore, local allotment & gardening groups demonstrated that they were certainly not beaten by the challenges faced - they kept growing! Prizes have been awarded in 34 classes – for the full results of the show please see Appendix 1,2a, 2b, 3, 4 & 5.
3.7	The Mid Ulster is Growing from Home scheme has now been completed with a final info sheet on 'Wrapping up the growing season' emailed out to all participants last week (see Appendix 6)
3.8	The ongoing enthusiastic participation by local groups and individuals and positive feedback received by participants throughout the project demonstrate the success of the scheme. There is certainly great potential for running a follow-up project based on a similar (mostly email based) format over the forthcoming winter months, when ongoing restrictions due to Corona are likely to continue to prevent regular events and face-to-face group activities from taking place.
3.9	A number of home growers have been shielding and deserve particular support to ensure that they can actually access the health & wellbeing activities offered within their communities.
3.10	The corona pandemic has brought another very acute dimension to Council's sustainability work at community grassroots level: sustainable food growing, food poverty, community resilience, life skills and the need to re-connect with land and nature are only some of the issues tapped into.
3.11	A lot of media attention is focussing on people's mental health during this pandemic. People are stretched to their limits: lockdown, restrictions, social isolation, severe changes to people's daily lives and routines, job losses/business closures/financial hardship, existential fears & increased stress. Practical community food growing initiatives can be one way of tackling these issues in a positive and tangible way.

3.12	Evidence from the Mid Ulster is Growing from Home 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 physically active and support their mental wellbeing during this 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.
4.0	Other Considerations
4.1	Financial, Human Resources & Risk Implications
	Financial: None, this project has led to further opportunities to apply for external grants, which hopefully will allow the running of a follow-up scheme over the winter.
	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 this report.
6.0	Documents Attached & References
	Results of 'End of Summer Virtual Show'
6.1	Appendix 1 – Part 1: General Garden Setting
6.2	Appendix 2a – Part 2 (a): Food produced
6.3	Appendix 2b – Part 2 (b): Food produced
6.4	Appendix 3 – Part 3: Food made from home-grown produce
6.5	Appendix 4 – Part 4: Environmentally friendly gardening
6.6	Appendix 5 – Part 5: Keeping up the community spirit
6.7	Appendix 6 – Information Sheet – Wrapping up the growing season