

Dónal McCormack:

Good afternoon, my name is Dónal McCormack and I am here representing Community Gardens Ireland.

We are a volunteer network of over 100 community gardens and allotments in existence since 2011. Last year we helped with over 66 direct queries supporting new and existing gardens and advised on the set up of school gardens.

In my case, I live in Blessington Co. Wicklow. My role here today is as Chairperson of Community Gardens Ireland, and I am joined by Maeve Foreman.

Maeve Foreman:

My role today is to talk briefly on the ‘why’ of community gardening. I’m from Mud Island community garden in Dublin’s north inner city. Its use during COVID was indispensable providing a safe outdoor space for use by local schools and groups. One example is our seed to pizza project with local primary schools where they grow wheat from seed, harvest it, mill it for flour, and learn how to make pizza in our pizza oven with help from the local Italian pizzeria.

As well as the obvious contribution that community gardens and allotments make to the National Biodiversity Action Plan and the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan, the evidence-based benefits include positive impacts on physical and mental health. There are also clear educational, cultural and social gains. They encourage active citizenship and social connection, and are ideally placed to receive referrals from the increasing number of social prescribers around the country.

Urban agriculture initiatives such as community gardening are highlighted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as assisting with reducing greenhouse gases, improving urban food security, improving biodiversity and adapting to climate change impacts.

Community gardens and allotments offer a cost-effective, accessible solution to improve health, strengthen community ties, and build a more resilient nation.

YET, despite all this, there is no country-wide policy in place to increase the number of allotments and community gardens.

Dónal McCormack:

According to the 2020 climate change report by the LGMA, there are over 2400 local authority allotments and 97 community gardens throughout Ireland, with 8 local authorities stating they don’t provide any.

Our own research shows that 23% of local authorities do not have a policy or objective for community gardens or allotments in their development plans. 71% don’t have a section on community growing on their websites and almost 89% do not operate a waiting list.

Compared to other countries, Ireland lags behind in the management, support and protection of allotments and community gardens. Our report includes details of this with Germany, the UK, Denmark and other countries offering far more plots per capita than Ireland.

Other countries have also improved legislation surrounding the provision of allotments and community gardens. Scotland & Wales require a government minister to formally approve if one is removed by a local authority and they have a duty to keep a waiting list and take action to ensure that local residents do not stay on them for long periods.

Our current legislation is weak and confusing. There are no requirements for waiting lists in each local authority, which makes it difficult for them to forecast or plan ahead for future use of land.

There are three primary pieces of legislation historically covering allotments in Ireland:

1) Labourers Cottages and Allotments (Ireland) Act, 1882

This law provided a path for labourers to be assigned an allotment when a cottage was provided, with an “allotment not exceeding half an acre”. This law remains in effect.

2) Acquisition of Land (Allotments) Acts, 1926 and 1934

In 1926, local authorities were given the option to perform compulsory purchase orders for the purchase of land for allotments. In the 1934 act, specific assistance was given to those who couldn't afford to rent an allotment, making them affordable by law.

In 1994, the 1926 and 1934 acts were repealed. Despite this, the acts have been referenced in answers given to three separate parliamentary questions in 2009, 2011 and 2013 by government departments. Local authorities still refer to the 1926 act, such as in the 2015-2021 Cork City Development Plan which has not yet been replaced. Community groups often refer to these acts when requesting public land for allotments or community gardens.

3) 2001 Local Government Act & 2010 Planning & Development Act

According to these acts, local authorities “may” provide allotments. The law has not caught up with the provision of community gardens as these are not defined in current legislation, and there is no condition of affordability.

In reality, there is no community growing law in Ireland. Community growing projects may believe they have protection by law but this is not the situation.

There has been a well-documented resurgence of interest in gardening and growing your own produce. In our 2021 survey, we found that only 20% of allotments and community gardens are permanent.

In the same week that Santry Community Garden in Dublin were included in the Top 10 Green Flag winners worldwide, other community groups were removed from their growing spaces. Given the demand for space in urban areas we can see this situation repeating itself more frequently in the coming years.

Our report proposes the following:

- Reform community growing legislation and issue guidance documents.
- Put a clear duty on local authorities to provide or facilitate the provision of community growing spaces within 5 years.
- A minimum number of requests after which community growing spaces must be provided.
- Require all local authorities to keep a waiting list.
- Make it compulsory that community growing spaces must be kept affordable.
- Ensure all local authorities include a policy or objective in their county development plan.
- Consider items such as a community land trust & Irish National Community Growers Forum.
- Set a target for doubling the number of community growing spaces in Ireland by 2025.

Our report has the support of GIY Ireland, Irish Seed Savers Association, Dublin Community Growers and Social Farms & Gardens Northern Ireland.

We hope we've demonstrated the immense benefits that come from the provision of allotments and community gardens, and ask you all to consider and implement these proposals.

"Let's Get Growing" the number of community growing spaces throughout Ireland!