

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM THITHÍOCHT, RIALTAS ÁITIÚIL AGUS OIDHREACTH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON HOUSING, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HERITAGE

Dé Máirt, 1 Márta 2022

Tuesday, 1 March 2022

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Thomas Gould,	Victor Boyhan,
Emer Higgins,	Mary Fitzpatrick,
Paul McAuliffe,	Rebecca Moynihan,
Cian O'Callaghan,	Mary Seery Kearney.
Eoin Ó Broin.	

Teachta / Deputy Steven Matthews sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Provision of Community Growing Spaces in Ireland: Community Gardens Ireland

Chairman: I welcome everybody to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage this afternoon. I welcome Mr. Dónal McCormack and Ms Maeve Foreman of Community Gardens Ireland. Members have been circulated with the briefing and the opening statements. I will first ask our guests to make their opening statements and then members will be invited to address questions to them. Members might keep their questions to five or six minutes. For the information of our guests, the time slots can probably extend to seven minutes but that includes the question and the answer. If members could keep their questions short, it would give our guests more time to provide their expert answers.

Before we begin, I remind members of the constitutional requirement that members must be physically present within the confines of the place where the Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House, in order to participate in the public meetings. For those attending remotely from within the Leinster House complex, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their contribution to today's meeting. This means that they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything they say at the meeting. The advice to witnesses attending remotely from outside the Leinster House complex does not apply today. Both members and witnesses are expected not to abuse the privilege they enjoy and it is my duty as Chair to ensure that this privilege is not abused. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

Members and witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. The opening statements submitted to the committee will be published on the committee website after this meeting.

I welcome Mr. McCormack and Ms Foreman. They had written to us previously seeking to appear before the committee. It just so happened that we had a meeting that could not take place and we were happy that they were available at short notice to come in to us. Will Mr. McCormack make the opening statement?

Mr. Dónal McCormack: We will share it.

Chairman: Okay. I call on Mr. McCormack to go ahead.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: My name is Dónal McCormack and I am here representing Community Gardens Ireland.

Community Gardens Ireland is 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 setting up of school gardens.

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

Ms Maeve Foreman: My role today is to talk briefly on the "why" of community gardening. Then I will hand back to Mr. McCormack, who will talk more about the "how".

I am from Mud Island community garden in Dublin's north inner city. This is our tenth

anniversary. We are on land that was zoned for social housing and it is currently in the development plan to be rezoned as zone 9 for social amenity and green networking. Its use during Covid was indispensable because it provided a safe outdoor space for use by local schools and groups. One good example was our seed-to-pizza project with a couple of the local schools where the children came in, grew wheat from seed, watched it grow, tended it, learnt how to harvest it to mill flour, and then Mr. Tino Fusciardi from our local pizzeria came and showed them how to make pizza in our pizza oven. Since then, many of them have brought their parents back into the garden.

As well as the obvious contribution that community gardens and allotments make to the national biodiversity action plan and the all-Ireland pollinator plan, to which Community Gardens Ireland contributes, the evidence-based benefits include positive impacts on physical and mental health. There is a lot of evidence. Some of the references on that are in the report that we have given to the committee. There are also clear educational, cultural and social gains. Gardens and allotments encourage active citizenship and social connection, and are ideally placed to receive referrals from the increasing number of social prescribers around the country. The new national network of social prescribers is an indication of how that is increasing.

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 also offer a cost-effective accessible solution to improve health, strengthen community ties and build a more resilient nation. Despite all of this, as Mr. McCormack will elaborate on, there is no countrywide policy in place to increase the number of allotments and community gardens.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: According to the 2020 climate change report by the Local Government Management Agency, LGMA, there are over 2,400 local authority allotments and 97 community gardens throughout Ireland, with eight local authorities stating that they do not 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. Seventy-one per cent do not 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 and 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 local authorities to forecast or plan ahead for future use of land.

There are three primary items of legislation historically covering allotments in Ireland. The first is the Labourers Cottages and Allotments (Ireland) Act 1882. This provided a path for labourers to be assigned an allotment when a cottage was provided, with “an allotment not ex-

ceeding half an acre”. This law remains in effect.

The second is the Acquisition of Land (Allotments) Acts 1926 to 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 could not 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 Departments. Local authorities still refer to the 1926 Act, such as in the Cork City Development Plan 2015-2021, which has not yet been replaced. Community groups often refer to these Acts when requesting public land for allotments or community gardens.

The third is the Local Government Act 2001 and the Planning and Development Act (Amendment) 2010. 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 case.

There has been a well-documented resurgence of interest in gardening and growing your own produce recently. In our 2021 survey, however, we found that only 20% of allotments and community gardens are permanent. In the same week that Santry community garden in Dublin was included in the top ten 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 five 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 and an Irish national community growers’ forum; and set a target for the doubling the number of community growing spaces in Ireland by 2025.

Our report has the support of GIY Ireland, the Irish Seed Savers Association, Dublin Community Growers, and Social Farms & Gardens Northern Ireland. We hope we have demonstrated the immense benefits that come from the provision of allotments and community gardens, and ask members to consider and implement these proposals. Let us grow the number of community growing spaces throughout Ireland.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: I thank and welcome Ms Foreman and Mr. McCormack and congratulate them on all the work they do, not just today but all the time, to promote growing and community gardens. Ms Foreman comes from Mud Island in the north inner city. It is in my constituency of Dublin Central. I learned gardening from my granny and she came from a generation who grew to sustain themselves. A garden is a happy and peaceful place to be. One works at a pace that is less frenetic than the rest of our lives in the big city.

In the north inner city, it is not surprising that there are Mud Island and the Stoneybatter serenity garden. Hardwicke Street flats have a project. In Cabra by the Royal Canal at Liffey Junction, Cabra For Youth, of which I am a founding director, has a garden where there is

intergenerational work. Young people work with senior citizens and there is the sharing and education that Ms Foreman referred to. De Courcy Square in Glasnevin is an old railed plot of land that was closed to residents for a long time but is now a great and vibrant garden. It is hugely important.

I am happy to support Community Gardens Ireland's recommendations. As a committee, we should support them. Mr. McCormack mentioned the model in Scotland. Will the witnesses talk about that? What benefits does that have that would deliver for us? From a city perspective, we have to formalise and champion community gardening.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: Scotland and Wales are similar in their approach. In Wales in 2009, a review was performed of community growing initiatives because it was known that they were not being promoted enough and that, at a government level, not enough was being done. A report came out from the Welsh Government in 2016 and from that came a list of guidance documents and recommendations as well as a clearing up of the legislation to make it easier for community groups to follow the law. As we have shown, it can be difficult and confusing. It took a long time to even find out there is legislation that is no longer in place. The clearing up of that to make it simple and digestible is important. Wales went a step further in 2021 by issuing a second version of these guidance documents. Having that in place and constantly revising it is useful for community groups because as communities and cities grow there is an overall change in guidance, which is important.

Scotland did similar and set up a national community growing forum. Members of allotment groups, community growers and all manner of urban agricultural schemes contributed to that and help to guide policy at a Scottish Government level. They have highlighted the climate change impacts from allotments and community gardens. There is a 2 kg to 5 kg reduction in carbon when food is grown locally. They have referenced that and it is important to call it out for this committee. They have put a waiting list in place so people do not stay on it for a long time. Five years is what they recommended. They have details for a minimum number of people who make requests to a local authority, at which point that authority must take action. All these initiatives help the local communities and make it easier for them.

I am part of a group in Blessington which has been seeking land from Wicklow County Council for four years. We have found some private land but are still seeking public land. Blessington is surrounded by green fields. There needs to be more emphasis and a time constraint put on this. That is something we can learn from countries such as Scotland and Wales.

Senator Mary Fitzpatrick: It is hard to believe that in Blessington there is not enough land. The pockets we have used in the city are modest pieces of land but what can be produced out of them and the activity and value it gives back to the community is immense. It is multiplied many times. Gabhaim buíochas le Mr. McCormack.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank Mr. McCormack and Ms Foreman for their presentation and report. I think they will find a receptive audience in the committee. We have all experienced good community gardens and allotments, but also the challenges they face. In my constituency, we had to threaten legal action against the diocese, which was attempting to relinquish land which actually belonged to South Dublin County Council and was in use as a valuable community garden in Balgaddy. Thankfully, it is still there and vibrant. It is run by community volunteers and does a huge amount of work with young children who, in a built-up urban area, would never otherwise get the opportunity to get their hands dirty on seeds and plants. We have some small pocket community gardens like in St. Mark's in north Clondalkin, where the council

has been proactive supporting the local community. However, volunteering and resourcing it has always been a challenge. It depends. In fairness to South Dublin County Council, we have some good community gardens like Corkagh Park, which proved successful.

The challenge is that local authorities do not always have land in the areas where it is needed, acquiring land is expensive and in the absence of that legal framework and Government policy, it is easy for councils to do less rather than more. The strongest arguments the witnesses are bringing is not why community gardens are a good thing, but why we need that national policy and legislative framework. I fully support that.

We can consider in private session on Tuesday whether to write to the Minister on foot of Community Gardens Ireland's recommendations and ask him to actively consider them. That would be positive. If the Minister was here and receptive, as I am sure he would be, to developing a State-wide policy to act as an overarching framework to push our local authorities on a bit better, what would the witnesses ask to see in it?

The good social housing projects in the early era of the State, whether by Cumann na nGaedheal, Fianna Fáil, Clann na Poblachta or the Labour Party, were all deliberately designed as garden villages. The reason so many of our grandparents have long, thin back gardens is they were all allotments. They were designed for people who grew their own vegetables. It is not like we are doing something new; we are trying to remind people that this is how our public housing was developed in the past. Given that it is always easier for the State to lead with its own projects, are there examples of other jurisdictions, whether Scotland, Wales or elsewhere in Europe, where, as a matter of principle, they fully integrate into public housing design and delivery a required amount of space for allotments or for people to have individual green-growing spaces? There are some wonderful social housing projects being developed in England where, instead of having entries and alleyways behind, they have open communal spaces with community gardens that people share for growing vegetables and flowers. Is there any additional information about that which the witnesses can share with us? We would be particularly interested in that.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: As to the recommendations for national growing we would have if a Minister was here, we have detailed them in the report. There is a strong need for legislative changes. That was one of the main things we wanted to communicate. There should be a waiting list in each local authority. It would make sense for it to be purely at a local authority level or even, perhaps, at a municipal district level. Being from Blessington, I am in the Baltinglass Municipal District. It is 72 km from the top to the bottom so if I was offered an allotment in Carnew or Baltinglass, there would not be the carbon benefit we mentioned. It needs to be kept local. We would look for a plan to be put in place for each urban area. It may not be a case of the local authority providing land; we have proposed it provides or facilitates the use of land. There are a number of State bodies with access to land. What we feel would make it better for communities is if they went through a single party, which would be the local authority, and it can be the conduit for those requests to go through. Again, we are just talking about simplifying the process.

In terms of other actions, we think it is important for guidance documents to be issued to landowners to make them more familiar with what allotments are and what the legal status is, and also to make them more assured that they will be able to access the land in the future. We have called out examples in Scotland and Wales that relate to compulsory purchase orders but also to compulsory hiring orders, something we do not have in place in Ireland. That would be in regard to hiring for a certain amount of time, after which the landowner would be able to retain ownership. Again, that is something for the committee to review.

We said that having a waiting list is very important, but also having a set target. We suggested doubling the number of allotments and community gardens by 2025. If we do not have a target, it is a bit aimless and there is no plan in place. We think having something like that would be essential.

With regard to Cork City Council, while the Deputy is talking about other jurisdictions, it included as part of its city development plan references to its apartment standards, where it is including a recommendation for allotments, roof gardens and so on. We have not seen that in other local development plans and that was the main area where we have seen it. The council stated that rooftop spaces should be put to productive use for either green roofs, blue roofs, solar energy, communal rooftop gardens, communal multi-use games areas, MUGAs, or communal allotments. I have not seen anything specifically calling out a design standard but that is the closest to it.

Ms Maeve Foreman: Cork is a very good example because the Cork Food Policy Council has been working closely with the city council in identifying plots of land in residential areas that maybe were just grass, and the local communities are taking them over and building small gardens here and there. It is essential that the planning insists that any large development includes a certain amount of green space.

Looking at the difficulties the Deputy has had, many of the most successful projects come from the ground up, where there are volunteers working with the council. The need is there, and there is ample evidence of the need for these growing projects across the island of Ireland. To have councils working with existing bodies of people who have expressed that need is the way to go.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the witnesses for their passionate contributions. The all-Ireland pollinator plan and the national biodiversity action plans are key strategies to help us protect and enhance biodiversity across Ireland. I gather from the presentations that the witnesses' concerns relate to nationwide plans not being necessarily supported by the roll-out of nationwide policies to underpin them. That seems to be in respect of allotments and community gardens. I would love to hear their views on what we could do to counteract that.

I would also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my own local authority, South Dublin County Council, where the director of services, Teresa Walsh, and her team have been bringing biodiversity to life for many years. Pollinator friendly zone signs can be seen in all of my local parks at this stage, for example, Rathcoole Park, Corkagh Park, Griffeen Valley Park, Lucan Demesne and Waterstown Park. Schools in Clondalkin have recently undertaken the development of gardens, with Coláiste Bríde and St. Mary's in Rowlagh partnering up with both Clondalkin Tidy Towns and the Dodder Valley Action Group to plant trees in their own school gardens. The girls in St. Joseph's Community College in Lucan have embarked on a fundraising campaign to raise money to develop Rosie's garden there, which is in memory of Sr. Rosario. We have great community gardens and allotments, as Ms Foreman said, in places like Corkagh Park, and the Clondalkin Men's Shed is also using an allotment in Fonthill.

This was a great way to keep people occupied at the time when Covid regulations loosened but people still could not be indoors. Covid and lockdown gave all of us the opportunity to take stock, take a step back and really appreciate nature more. We saw more people than ever using our parks and getting involved in gardening. These are all positives because they are the kinds of things that can have a real and lasting effect when it comes to biodiversity and things like our bee population.

I was particularly interested in what Ms Foreman said around communal rooftop gardens. As she said, like plants themselves, these strategies work best when they come from the ground up. I would be very interested to hear what kinds of strategies and policies we could put in place nationally that would incorporate and allow for communal rooftop gardens to become naturally part of not just the design of buildings but of the community and the culture of all those living in buildings.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: In terms of what can be done at local authority level for each local authority, we think there is a need for them to incorporate a waiting list to make it a little easier for local communities to avail of it. Even simple tasks like putting a section on their websites about community growing, allotments and community gardens would be positive. We found that a large number do not have information on their websites, which is not beneficial to local communities. That would be an easy task and it could be done at a local authority level.

For rooftop gardens, it is down to planning. We think that having that included as an objective for local authorities would be very easily performed and could be done. We made a submission recently to the Dublin City Council city development plan process which referenced the good work that is being done in Cork city. We think that is something that could be mirrored across other local authorities.

Ms Maeve Foreman: I would add that the current draft development plan for Dublin City Council includes investigating the potential of rooftop gardens. It also has as an objective to increase by 100% the number of allotments in Dublin. If more county councils could be encouraged to include objectives similar to that in their development plan, it would be one step forward.

Deputy Emer Higgins: If we had nationwide targets that rolled down to a local authority level, it could work. I thank both of the witnesses for their time. I am from Brittas, which is not too far from Blessington, so I know it well. I wish them the best of luck with the community garden there.

Ms Maeve Foreman: Our report notes that eight councils around the country do not have any community gardens or allotments at all. That is an indication of the need for a national policy so they are all encouraged and mandated to develop some.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I understand. That is a good idea.

Chairman: Is there a definition of what is an allotment and what is a community garden, so we know exactly what we are talking about?

Ms Maeve Foreman: One of the interesting things about how allotments and community gardens have developed is that each has their own personality. Some allotments are literally that. A certain number of people can apply for and get a plot of a certain size, or a half a plot, and grow produce for themselves and their family. However, most allotment sites have a community element. In St. Anne's Park, where there are individual allotments, two or three have been banded together, and that is a community garden element. People who do not have an allotment or do not have the time or energy to give to it can take part in the community garden element, and they grow a mixture of vegetables and flowers and have a sitting area and a communal social area. In community gardens like my own, we grow everything collectively. We have a planting group which plans the year, and the produce is shared by everybody who comes and works in the garden. We are purely communal and collective, although many plots have

a little of both. De Courcy Square, which was mentioned by Senator Fitzpatrick, is individual allotments owned by people of the square but they also have a community garden element.

Chairman: The community garden is more of a shared using of a communal space whereas the allotment is where each person has their little section.

Ms Maeve Foreman: It is hard to generalise. For example there is a new garden in Waterford called Top of the City, which has developed allotments that individuals have, but there is a huge communal element. They have a stage for performances, a picnic area for people and they hold markets on a Saturday, so it is a hybrid.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: There will always be a shared nature to them. Even in our own area on private land in Blessington we have a compost area but we do not have one compost area for each plot, rather we share it. There is always a sharing element in the use of these spaces.

Chairman: I will move on to the Independent slot, which Senator Boyhan will take.

Senator Victor Boyhan: I welcome the witnesses. This is a great news story. I studied horticulture and I have had an allotment. I grow my own vegetables. I have a great interest in this area. As Ms Foreman said, Covid brought into sharp focus a desire for safe open spaces where people can meet in friendship, to engage in horticulture and grow items or to simply to be an observer. The reasons are diverse. She put her finger on it when she said all these community gardens have their own personalities and within that, there is a whole load of personalities as she will well know. I have been to places where there are disputes over plots and bits of land in allotments, I have seen communal gardens where people share the produce and there also are individuals who like to work on their own. I am not sure if the witnesses are familiar with Festina Lente, which was a substantial piece of ground in the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown area, out in the Rathmichael direction, but it was never developed. A wonderful organisation, Festina Lente, hasten slowly, which provided sheltered employment opportunities for people with disabilities, had so much ground that it put allotments around it but now those people have been forced out because developers want the land. There is always that demand. That loss is regrettable. Having looked at the UK model, I am familiar with the one in Battersea where the people convinced the council to change the land zoning. It was very positive in terms of mental health and many other issues. People said this was positive news. The council switched that piece of land for another piece of land because it knew it could not recreate what the people had there. I am convinced this is a great idea. There are different models for different places just as there are different horses for different courses.

A big issue I have learned from my knowledge of and involvement in community gardens is that we also need to talk about community gardeners, about people who lead where leadership and skills are required. I visited a place in south County Dublin where there were approximately 40 allotments, half of which had gone seed and were abandoned. When I asked why that had happened, I was told that other than growing cabbage and potatoes, the people did not know how to grow anything else. They did not have the skill set. There is a need for local authorities to employ a community gardener to assist people. People bring different levels of skills to different places. I would like to hear more about that proposal. I have looked at the Scottish model, which Mr. McCormack referenced in his presentation. It seems to have worked very well in Scotland and Wales. I know they are great gardeners but I am now convinced we have become even greater gardeners, certainly in the past two years. There is massive new interest in gardening and growing and the fact that people are out in the air and have their hands in the

soil. It is organic. There is something to be had by putting one's hands directly into the soil and growing items. That is a positive development.

We do not have agricultural committees in Dublin any more. We used to have county agricultural committees. That was a missed opportunity. I live in Dún Laoghaire, and as in the case of Fingal and south Dublin, there are agricultural lands right up to the county areas of the city but we do not have agricultural committees as such. What are the witnesses' view on community gardeners, leaders or advocates who would assist people who want to gain knowledge? One learns in gardening from making mistakes. There is need for such assistance. I am familiar with community land trusts in the UK. They work really well. What is the witnesses' experience, if any, of community land trusts and how can we develop them? I do not want to move responsibility for such provision from central government to local government but I believe the bulk of this can all be driven at local government level. It is about connectivity, subsidiarity and meeting the needs of the people in local communities. I am 100% supportive of community gardens. We need loads more of them. The witnesses might share with the committee their experience of community land trusts and how they work.

Ms Maeve Foreman: I will address the Senator's first question. There are many good examples around Dublin city and around Ireland of different models. Cherry Orchard is a community garden managed by the local partnership company and it has employed a horticulturist, Peadar Lynch, who used to be chair of Dublin Community Growers. He runs an excellent garden and he is available there with his expertise. That community garden has a market. The growers sell local produce they grow in the local area. That is one model. There is another community garden in Finglas that has a full-time employee who is a horticulturist and has some Tús workers working with him and in that way people are learning horticultural skills. There are both elements there. Some people have their own allotments, there is a community garden element and a paid worker. In my own case in Mud Island we are all volunteers and we have learned as we have gone on. We brought in expertise. We got a compost master to come in and show us about composting. In the case of another garden near us, the north east inner city community garden which is called Farmers Hill, once that community garden had a certain number of people, the education and training board provided a horticulturist to go into it once a week and work with the people over a whole growing season and they learned a great deal from her. That is something education and training boards will provide. Dee Sewell, who was involved in setting up Community Gardens Ireland is another full-time horticulturist working in the Carlow area and she is employed by the local authority to work with and support local growing projects to get off the ground, some in schools and some attached to NGOs. There are loads of models. An area I want to visit, which I have just heard about, is Cloontuskert, County Roscommon, which is an old Bord na Móna village. The local Tidy Towns committee led in developing a community orchard and garden and growing projects in schools. There are some lovely models around Ireland, each with their own personality. We should probably compile an overview of the different models.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: One difference between what has happened in Battersea in the UK and ourselves is that if eight local residents in England or Wales request a plot, the local authority must provide it. That provision has been in place since 1908. While we referenced Scotland and Wales because they have a similar climate, Denmark in 2001 made all its allotments and community gardens permanent overnight because it thought that they would be removed.

In terms of community land trusts, we know that in Scotland community land trusts are 90% funded. That could be considered for Ireland. Currently, we are not aware of any grants

available for the purchase of land. All the grants exclude major funding such as land purchase. That is why we think a model such as community land trusts could put access to land back into the hands of communities.

Chairman: I thank Senator Boyhan for his contribution. The Green Party has the next time slot, which I will take. I have a few questions.

I will start with the legislation as that is how things work and how we can get things done. To take up on what Deputy Ó Broin said, of course, we are very receptive to this initiative. Everybody is very receptive to allotments and community gardeners and thinks they are a good idea but getting such projects implemented is the difficulty. I know that from experience. Three items of legislation were referenced. The Labourers Cottages and Allotments (Ireland) Act 1882 was rarely if ever used I would say in the past 100 years. Therefore, we should get rid of that one. The Acquisition of Land (Allotments) Acts 1926 and 1934 were repealed. Therefore, we get rid of that one. That brings us on to the Local Government Act and the Planning and Development Act, under which local authorities may provide allotments. In my experience when we insert the word “may” into legislation, we can be up against it but if we change the word “may” to “shall”, we have more momentum behind us. We might consider wording along the lines of “shall provide allotments provided there is demonstrable demand for them”. Mr. McCormack spoke about facilitating provision. It is one of the organisation’s recommendations. Recommendation 1C of Community Gardens Ireland’s report states a clear duty should “be placed on local authorities to provide or facilitate provision of community growing spaces within 5 years”. To facilitate that, are the witnesses talking about identifying land, either public or private, or zoning land and holding it? When preparing a local area plan is the land zoned first to expect the demand or is the demand catalogued and a decision made to zone some land there? How does one do it? Those are the practicalities and that is what we want to assist with.

Ms Maeve Foreman: I will give the Chairman a brief example of Mud Island. The site we are on is quite small. It was zoned residential. It was a residential block that was demolished on site and then left derelict. It was an eyesore. The council allocated, on an 11-month renewable licence with a compulsory vacate for a month, the land to Mud Island Community Garden on a third of the site, the Larkin Unemployed Centre has a horticultural course there on a third of the site and the rest the council keeps vacant.

The area we live in has the lowest tree canopy in the country, let alone the city. Since it became a useful green space, it now has in its development plan suggested that it be rezoned from one to nine, reflecting the use of it over the past ten years and the success of the use of it over the past ten years. The rezoning is happening.

Chairman: Ms Foreman referred to a suggestion that it be rezoned as that. That is a local-----

Ms Maeve Foreman: It is in the draft plan.

Chairman: Is that the chief executive recommending it or is that a councillor who is tabling an amendment on that? That is a very important distinction.

Ms Maeve Foreman: To tell the Chair the truth, I-----

Mr. Dónal McCormack: I think it was the chief executive.

Chairman: That gives it much more clout than if it was the councillor saying it. That is the

other thing, this meanwhile use of handing out a derelict piece of land to local community gardens is great for three, four or five years, until the landowner then says that they want to develop it now or the local authority says that it now has a need for the land to go back into housing. Suddenly, one has ended up in this situation where one has to evict the community gardeners from a site they have put loads of work into for four or five years.

Ms Maeve Foreman: Sometimes it is known from the start that it is a meanwhile garden and for meanwhile use. For example, there is the case of Weaver's Square in Dublin, where the council needed to take it back because it was zoned for housing. It was an ideal site for housing. However, it replaced it with a few smaller sites. There were not as many allotments as there were in Weaver's Square, but at least the council worked with the gardeners and gave them something to replace it.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: The survey we conducted in 2021 showed that only about 20% of allotments in community gardens were permanent. First off, increasing that number would be something that would be fantastic to come out of this committee. A figure of 20% is incredibly low, and it shows the risk for many of the other gardens that are out there.

In terms of the question about having the word "shall" in there, this is not just about allotments, it is also about allotments and community gardens. Therefore, it should have some type of definition around community growing spaces or something along those lines. We were having this discussion beforehand, and when it comes to more built-up areas, allotments might not actually be feasible because there could be too many people who want to use a certain space. Having something that could be provided which could be community gardens instead of allotments might be a bit more preferable. However, some type of emphasis needs to be put on local authorities to achieve that.

I cannot remember if it is in the development plan or not, but Dublin City Council has committed to carry out an audit of all green space areas to see which lands could be used for allotments or community gardens. Doing that on a five- or ten-year basis would be quite good because once the waiting list is set up, that is the data required and then the review can be done and the demand in the local area is known. Doing that on a frequent basis would be a good action for local authorities to undertake. It is not just looking at their own land; it is looking at all available land in the area as well and trying to see if there are other State-owned bodies that they would be able to use or use their land or have a partnership approach with them that they provide for a certain number of years.

Looking at Denmark again, it has classified permanent gardens and non-permanent gardens. That is something which could end up being the result of this, namely, that they are defined and there is a risk associated with some meanwhile uses. What we want is those cases where evictions will happen is for a solution to be put place beforehand. It is quite reasonable for allotments and community gardens to be provided with a solution well in advance and for consultation to be there. Having some sort of right of local communities to be able to access land would be very useful.

Chairman: Just on that, and to put it in practical terms for us, I see allotments as I get the DART home and look out the window at Shankill, where there are huge allotments set up. It very impressive. However, I have seen much smaller patches as well. In general terms of allotments, it is not a huge space we are talking about much of the time. Can Mr. McCormack put it in perspective for us? What is the size of a plot?

Mr. Dónal McCormack: The size of plots vary. Each garden and area has its own use case. The ones we have in Blessington are 20 sq. m each, which is small, but it is a nice place to start off with. Fingal has between 50 to 250 sq. m and South Dublin County Council is the same. It depends on the amount of land is available. Some gardeners prefer to start off in a small plot and then once they have the knowledge built up over a certain number of years, they might expand to a larger plot for allotments. It varies down to the site, down to the people and down to the knowledge and skill set as well.

Ms Maeve Foreman: Some of the more secure community gardens are situated on land beside a health centre or a family support centre and were actually started by those places for the benefit of their local communities. Permanency is part of the vision.

Chairman: I am out of time so I will stop. However, we will have a second round of questions and we have more to come back on.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I would like to thank Mr. McCormack and Ms Foreman for coming in and their contributions on this. In my local area, there are two very successful community gardens, in Baldoyle and Bayside. Both of them have transformed the local communities way beyond the people who are involved. It has actually had a transformative effect in terms of people feeling safer in the area, feeling happier, more people getting to know each other and other activities falling out of that. When I think of Bayside as a community and how much it has transformed over the past ten years through that, it is incredible. It has done it through existing green open spaces that were underutilised. It has put in a winter garden and a community orchard. It did not require getting new land or identifying extra land or anything like that, it was in a very settled community where there was not any new land available. It was about using existing spaces in a better way. Interestingly, when it started, there was a bit of reaction because people are used things always being the same way, so not everybody was happy. However, I think at this point there would be massive support in the local community for the work it has done. From that, other things have fallen out of it. For example, the community next to it looks at all of the things Bayside is doing and thinks it would like to have a boules court in our area that gets the local community together.

In Baldoyle, for example, the communal spaces are very good. It has a stage area for performances, a boules court and a barbecue area. The communal areas are very important. In Baldoyle, it was bringing the newer communities together with the existing community and integrating people. It is very useful for people who are living without their own gardens and also just for people who want to form those kind of social bonds. That part of it is very important.

What are the witnesses’ views on the legislation on this? I absolutely understand the value of individual plots as well and if they are integrated into some form of communal or shared space, that can work very well. Is there a way, in terms of legislative reform, of putting in the value of the community space or communal parts?

Ms Maeve Foreman: That is an interesting one to answer. In our own case, a local group formed and we wanted a growing project; some wanted allotment and some wanted a community garden. Dublin City Council at the time had a waiting list and said that if it is allotments, no one will get one because there were 400 people on the waiting list. That decided on a community garden for us. Initially, we were only about growing food. The community element that the Deputy talked about evolved over time. Just ten years on, we have changed our constitution to recognise that the social and recreational element is equally as important as the food growing element. We now have two stages, a barbecue and a pizza oven and many social and arts events

in the garden. It evolved organically. I do not know if one can dictate that element. It comes out of the community working together.

There are loads of examples of that idea of using existing spaces. There is a new garden getting off the ground in Killester called the Back Lane because it is a back lane that they are taking over. There is another one in Donnycarney called Mucky Lane, which was just a bit of open space between two areas that was underutilised. The council was happy for the local residents to farm that space and make a garden out of it. It is getting the balance between the community and the local authority or whoever owns the land, such as the church or the HSE, working together and being open to that community element. I do not think that it can be dictated.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: That absolutely makes sense. From what I have seen as well, people can often get involved because they want a bit of a plot themselves and from that community builds over time. It might be something that should be part of policy or something and should be encouraged or fostered. I absolutely take Ms Foreman’s point that that is not necessarily where things start. Mucky Lane, which is in my constituency, was an area that people walked through. It was an area that-----

Ms Maeve Foreman: It was a mucky lane.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: Yes, exactly. That has totally transformed that area. The knock-on effects of people feeling safe or having ownership over their area, and not feeling demoralised by litter or whatever but having the opposite reaction are huge. There are massive benefits.

On the legislative side, is there anything else the witnesses want to say in terms of legislative reform? What needs to be done there? Where do we start in terms of legislative reform?

Mr. Dónal McCormack: We start by stopping mentioning the 1926 and 1934 Acts. I had a look last night and saw there are references by Kildare County Council and Dublin City Council. It is everywhere. There does not seem to have been any communication as to why the previous laws have been repealed. The fact that they are still being referred to implies strongly in my view that there needs to be a community growing law to replace that. I suppose that is where I am coming from at the start. Mentioning that in all manner of policies and things should not be happening, particularly when it was 1994. It was not like it happened last year.

Regarding other parts of legislation, I think we covered most of it in terms of having a waiting list and a clear requirement for local authorities to provide some measure of a timeline. We recommended five years. Again, that is what Scotland has in its legislation so we are copying what it has.

We were discussing that there is a potential to amend the Local Government Act 2001 rather than having bespoke legislation on this. Allotments are detailed in the 2001 Act. That could, therefore, be something for the committee to look at as well rather than having its own legislation. I think that pretty much covers it. The whole point really is to make it easier for communities at the end of the day. That is all we want. We should not have to wait. Some communities have been waiting ten years for lands, which is an obscene amount of time. South Dublin County Council last year defined its waiting list as being ten years for someone who is on it.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: It should not rely on individuals on councils being receptive to this and encouraging it. In my area, Fingal County Council and Dublin City Council have been very good on this but it is individuals who are opposed to it necessarily happening. There

is something to be said as well, though, when there is a limited supply of land for the smaller plots or community gardens. If there is more land, then, sure, have larger allotments but if it is confined, that is different.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: It goes back to the point that every garden has its own personality. They will change shape to meet the needs of the community.

Chairman: I thank Deputy O’Callaghan. I note the Senators are in the Seanad, so I will move to the second Sinn Féin slot with Deputy Ó Broin and then to the Fianna Fáil slot in that order. I thought I saw Deputy Gould on the screen.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I do not think Deputy Gould is here but I know he wanted to come in.

Chairman: He was on the screen but I do not see him at the moment. Deputy Ó Broin may wish to take this slot or let Deputy McAuliffe go first.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Let Deputy McAuliffe come in and I will take the next slot if Deputy Gould does not show up.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: There seem to be two challenges here. One is to tell the witnesses how supportive we are of it and the other is to name all the community gardens in each of our constituencies. I will try to live up to the challenge previous colleagues have set.

I think everyone in the room agrees with this because of how important it is and because of practical experience. I do not think that is a new, woke or middle class thing. This has been with us for a long time. My grandfather had what we used to call a plot in Dunsink. Many rural people who came up to live in the new suburbs in Dublin often had access to these types of plots. In his case, it was something to help supplement the income of the family. When it came to March each year, the whole house would be turned into a shamrock-bagging operation or there would be potatoes - whatever we happened to be doing. It has been with us for a long time.

The second thing is that we have all seen the practical benefits of these often unused and underutilised pieces of land being turned into a community gain. In some ways, the fight is part of the formation of the group; not that one would leave it there for that reason. I have seen very strong groups emerge out of it, however. Santry Demesne is probably one of the strongest groups in my area. It is one of the most independent as a result but it is also supported by the local authority. I was involved in the Ballymun farmers’ market and also in setting up Greenview community garden, which the witnesses referenced, with the Tús scheme. I can, therefore, see all the benefits.

Let me talk about some concerns I have because the idea of community markets is a similar area. Increasingly, casual trading is not used for the provision of community markets but instead, it is done under an events licence. The reason for that is the regulations and responsibilities around casual trading are quite onerous. They can be restrictive and do not allow the market to express that personality Mr. McCormack talked about. One fear I have is that we could over-regulate the space and interfere with the creativity of the gardens and allotments. I wonder whether legislation is necessarily the answer for the operational side. We should be fearful of that.

One example in Ballymun that is really useful is Muck and Magic community garden,

which is brilliant. Ballymun was unique because we had sites that we were retaining for owner-occupied homes to provide a better mix in the community. Lands were set aside until that came on stream. The “meanwhile” use has ended up being approximately a decade. Now that those tools have come on board with both cost-rental and affordable purchase housing, we are going to move Muck and Magic community garden, with its full agreement and co-operation, over to the other side of Ballymun where we are building an affordable purchase site in order that we can build a cost-rental site on the Muck and Magic community garden site. Deputy Ó Broin is right; public housing policy is really key here. What we want to do on the Balbutcher Lane site is to go much further and develop a city farm, which is a whole different kettle of fish.

Housing policy is an area in which we should be looking at legislation. On the Balbutcher Lane site, we are looking at the 20% open green space as being one opportunity to protect land. This comes back to the question of our definition of open green space and biodiversity. I encourage the witnesses heavily to engage with the Citizens’ Assembly on Biodiversity Loss. We have acres of parkland that is beautifully landscaped grass. Much of it could easily be transferred for smaller-use plots. Many of our public parks could easily accommodate more allotments. They are already owned by the council and insurance and all those issues are covered. If one is covered in potato plants rather than grass, does that detract from the public domain? We need to have a conversation about that.

Dublin City Council did a very good persuasion exercise with our Tidy Towns group where it said that if we do not cut the grass, that is not a bad thing. That is not the council letting the Tidy Towns down, it is about increasing biodiversity. Now, there is a fine line there as well. However, the people it persuaded first were those in the Tidy Towns groups because they would be the first people to telephone the council to say it did not cut the grass and, therefore, let the place go. Instead, the council empowered them and gave them training as pollinators and so forth.

We need to have a huge debate around our public park space and how we could better use that. That does pose a challenge for ownership. Sometimes community gardens are about giving people ownership but the downside of that is that they can go from being inclusive to exclusive. Councils are notoriously afraid of giving anything more than a licence to anybody because a committee can become defunct and a space can then be locked out from the public rather than locked in.

I would be supportive and we could do much good work in this space as a committee. The problem is that we keep coming up with ideas on what to do thanks to witnesses coming in. My fear is that we could over-regulate them. If we even look at Mud Island community garden, would Dublin City Council ever have given that to Community Gardens Ireland if it thought it was getting it permanently?

Ms Maeve Foreman: We campaigned for two years, which, as the Deputy said, was the formation of our group.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I am worried that it might have a chilling effect on local authorities transforming informal space into formal space if we over-regulate it. It is a balance about which we need to be careful.

Ms Maeve Foreman: I can give a couple of examples that I think are good models. As it is a first for Dublin, people might be aware of the Bridgefoot Street park. Eventually, because of local campaigns, it was decided to make it into a park because that area of Dublin was really

low on green spaces. An element of the park is to have a community garden. That will be a permanent community garden. Likewise, moving Muck and Magic community garden over to Poppintree to be part of the city farm is giving that garden an element of permanency. In both cases, strong local groups were involved in the running of it. Farmers Hill community garden in my area of the north-east inner city is another example. That was a garden on a temporary space, which the council took back. There is development going on and it is giving half of the space back to Farmers Hill as a permanent garden.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: It was interesting when Ms Foreman talked about her own situation. She said there was already a waiting list for it and that if that had happened, her group would have been locked out of that space. It would not, therefore, have had the same ownership of that space. An idea or solution Ms Foreman suggested, for example, a standardised waiting list or some sort of waiting list, could in some ways limit the local ownership if it is an area-wide waiting list. We need to be careful about interfering too much, although that is not to say we should not support it.

Ms Maeve Foreman: It is clear one size does not fit all. Where there is a will and a willingness on the part of the local authority areas, such as in Back Lane and Mucky Lane, we can make good use, as the Deputy noted, of these idle spaces that are no good to anybody. As for pollinating and biodiversity, it is better that they are not just flat grass but rather that they be grown on. We need more and more models such as that in Bridgefoot Street. There are many areas throughout the country such as Cloontuskert, County Roscommon, where the community garden is in a corner of a public park, so it is open. Serenity community garden, which is on a corner plot, is another garden that is open to the public. The origins of it relate to a homeless man having been found dead in the bushes there, and there was a desire to do something in his memory and to make better use of the spot. There are many good examples of sites where the best use of them is as a community garden.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Some of these proposals should form part of the work of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, and there might be a good pipeline in that regard for policy as well.

Chairman: Does Mr. McCormack wish to comment on that? It is an interesting point Deputy McAuliffe made about the legislation. If the legislation is too confining in respect of the management and use of the land, I can see how that might stifle the creativity and communal aspect. On the other hand, if the legislation is clear on the provision of those spaces, that will be a different matter. One relates to legislating to provide, while the other relates to legislating to control. The provision part is where we need to concentrate, in my opinion.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: I completely agree. We need to put some rights in place for local communities and that is something that can be provided for. I mentioned earlier the idea of community growing spaces and having some flexibility in the definition, rather than just saying there must be an allotment, as is the case in England and Wales. Having flexibility to reflect the needs of the community is important. There is a balance to be struck but having some additional rights for local communities can only help them. I agree that being too prescriptive might stifle the potential in some ways. There are good examples that could be used from some of the community gardens we mentioned earlier.

I am a chartered engineer, so I always look for design standards. One issue I would think about relates to wheelchair-friendly raised beds, for example. That is something on which it would be very easy to be given guidance, and it should not be done at just one local authority

level. It could be done for all local authorities because it would be very easy to do. Something along those lines could be done on an all-Ireland level.

Having some sort of right for local communities will prompt a better response, whereby we will not have to wait ten years or possibly longer for some communities to deliver.

Chairman: We have managed to mention most of the community gardens and allotments in Dublin, so I will now give Deputy Gould an opportunity, in the interests of balanced regional growth, to talk about Cork.

Deputy Thomas Gould: In fact, I am going to mention an example that is near to County Dublin. I recently saw a report on the expected closure of Greystones Kilcoole community garden, due to its lease not having been renewed. In researching for this meeting, I learned that 80% of community gardens, or 1,920 of them, face a similar fate. Will our guests comment on that?

Mr. Dónal McCormack: The Deputy is asking whether a large majority of community gardens and allotments are at risk.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Yes.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: I believe they are. Our survey, which was carried out in 2021, was indicative, but we can apply its findings to allotments and community gardens. They could be removed for other purposes, given there is no defined right in any legislation for local communities to be given a community growing space in the first instance. By all means, given very few are defined as permanent, they could be removed.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Deputy Ó Broin earlier raised the issue of planning. My father's house, in Knocknaheeny, has a fine big backyard, and many houses that were built 70, 80 or 90 years ago have big front and back gardens. Nowadays, however, especially in the case of city developments, apartments and even some of the regeneration projects in Knocknaheeny, where I come from, there are no front gardens, just a driveway for a car, in some cases only a couple of feet in front of the property. In response, the planning system has favoured higher densities but that has a consequence for open green spaces. Some great work is being done by volunteers and some areas are getting good funding but there is an awful lot of work to be done.

In many areas, especially working-class areas where there is much social housing, people might work shifts and weekends. They do not have their Saturdays off to go and work in a community garden. Moreover, some local authorities, which may be under severe pressure in regard to funding, do not have enough staff to work in parks and recreational areas, to maintain these green areas and community gardens and to get them up to spec. That is a real concern. The areas that have the volunteers and funding will have beautiful green spaces and community gardens, and the areas that do not, which probably need the funding most, will not.

Ms Maeve Foreman: We need balance and variety. As Deputy Ó Broin said, some gardens work really well where they are led by a horticulturist and where training is provided. The garden beside Mud Island is run by the Larkin Unemployed Centre and there is a horticultural course for unemployed men. Having finished that, they can go on to the National Botanic Gardens and undertake further education. The hope is that, beyond that, they will find employment. There are many different models out there. Some are top-heavy with volunteers, while others are top-heavy with trained workers and supporters.

The Greystones-Kilcoole garden, which the Deputy mentioned, is on private land and has been in existence in for the guts of ten years. I understand the people concerned were locked out of the garden with little or no notice. If there had been a commitment on the part of the council to providing growing spaces, that could have been anticipated and, perhaps, they could have been moved to other land. The other garden whose operators have been told their licence will not be renewed is the Growery in Birr. I am not sure whether the committee will be aware of that but it has been in existence for a long time and the garden is very successful. Its operators, too, have been told they will have to move on, in June.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: To clarify, the Greystones Kilcoole community garden is on public land, controlled by Wicklow County Council, but a sub-agreement is in place with the current user of the land. That is one of the issues.

Chairman: There are many excellent public representatives in Wicklow and many of them are working on this issue. I believe there could be a resolution. It is not just me; many of us are working on it. The garden has been there for a long time.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Feighan, was in Cork last week and visited a community garden. He was asked about funding and support for men's sheds and he said money will always be available for community gardens and similar initiatives under Healthy Ireland. If only 20% of these gardens are permanent, are we funding ones that may soon shut? If we are putting funding into gardens that are not permanent, that does not make sense. We want gardens to be permanent and, therefore, as more and more funding is put in, there will be a better community garden and a better green space and it will grow with the community. The Minister of State is saying funding is available, but if 80% of the gardens are not permanent, is that financially prudent given that in one, two, three or ten years in some cases, the community garden will be gone?

Mr. Dónal McCormack: I might comment on what "permanent" means. When we carried out our survey, we examined whether gardens or allotments had a rolling licence, and many of them had an 11-month or two-year licence, or something along those lines. The issue relates to the fact very few have longer leases, and one of the larger grants that can be applied for – I am not sure whether it is LEADER funding or the urban regeneration and development fund - requires a seven-year lease to be in place before it can be applied for. There are larger funding models that gardens cannot apply for because they have not been around for long enough.

Deputy Thomas Gould: To be considered long term or renewable, most leases would have to be for longer than five years. If a lease is longer than five years, the tenant has the option to renew it. If it is for less than five years, the tenant has to leave if the landowner asks. As such, what Mr. McCormack said makes sense.

Complimentary comments were made about Cork City Council. I can be critical of local authorities. This is especially true of Cork City Council, where I was a member for nearly 12 years, but it does great work. It is good that meetings on the Cork city development plan are happening at the moment. The witnesses mentioned apartment or rooftop gardens and open spaces. Other countries are decades ahead of us in this respect. It is good that Cork City Council is holding these meetings but it is a pity that not all local authorities are being so proactive.

The Cork food policy and working with the council have been mentioned. Touching on Deputy Ó Broin's point about green spaces, there are a large number of planning applications now. I come from Knocknaheeny. When it was built 50 years ago, there was nothing there –

no green spaces, parks, playgrounds, schools, churches or shopping centres. At the height of the Celtic tiger 15 or 20 years ago, houses were being built without sustainable planning for communities, including green spaces and community gardens. I have serious concerns that the Government and developers are now trying to maximise density and that this will cause harm through not having enough green spaces. We must be planning communities, not just houses or apartments. We can see what Cork City Council is doing.

Targets were mentioned. It is important that we set ourselves goals because they can be measured against. The witnesses could then appear before us once per year and we could have a discussion on how we have done over the preceding 12 months. We could invite local authorities to say how they had done. We can work on this hand in hand.

I appreciate that the Chairman has given me latitude, but the planning issue here is the importance of community gardens and green spaces. I wish to give a shout-out to people in Hollyhill in my constituency. There is a lovely community garden there, but the same should be found in all communities. Have the witnesses concerns about whether enough consideration is being given to green spaces and community gardens in new planning applications?

Mr. Dónal McCormack: We are here because we are concerned. There are no design standards for how many allotments or community gardens should be provided for a certain number of requests, a certain population or a new development. If 400 houses are being provided, there is not even a recommendation for a certain number of allotments or community gardens to be provided. Having such a guideline would not stifle planning too much and would give an indication to developers to plan such areas accordingly. Everyone knows that, if they are not planned for at the start, it is ridiculously hard to shoehorn them in afterwards. That is common sense.

Regarding targets, something that we did not mention but that is probably important is that, in 2008, London set a target of increasing the number of community growing spaces it provided by 2012. Working with different communities and all political parties, London achieved that. If there is one point that is taken from today's meeting, it should be that having a target for all of the country – Ireland is small – would be beneficial. We could learn from the London experience.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Chair, may I-----

Chairman: I wish to let Ms Foreman in. I will then let the Deputy back in. It is only him, Deputy Ó Broin and me remaining and I believe that Deputy Ó Broin wants to contribute on the third round, as do I.

Ms Maeve Foreman: I will address Deputy Gould's concern about the cost of investing in meanwhile spaces. We are not talking about a great deal of money. It costs thousands of euro, not tens of thousands. This would buy soil if necessary, a bit of wood for raised beds and plants. If volunteers want to work a space, they do not need much money to develop it.

Deputy Thomas Gould: There is another issue. I am the chairman of St. Vincent's Hurling and Football Club. Our treasurer, Mr. Kenneth Collins, who is a Sinn Féin councillor in Cork, is working with Cork City Council to designate a part of our sporting complex as an area of biodiversity. We are always looking to keep everything trim and tidy – the pitches, the land around them and the banks – and it looks beautiful, but as we learn more about biodiversity, perhaps GAA clubs, soccer clubs, rugby clubs and other sporting organisations should be look-

ing at doing something else where they have land that they do not use for training. It could be along the side or a corner that is rocky or soft for most of the year. As part of a good initiative, we are working with Cork City Council and have pinpointed an area that we will now let grow wild. We are also working with the council on planting trees. This is another good initiative. I would like to see it being rolled out to all sporting organisations with green spaces. Consider how many sporting clubs Ireland has. Sporting organisations should be encouraged to get on board with this. For example, the GAA has Croke Park. It would not cost much money. We were always so keen to have everything tidy and prim, but now we know that biodiversity and working with nature are something we need to pursue for the health of the planet and our communities.

Chairman: I might continue that point before calling Deputy Ó Broin. We have lost touch with biodiversity. There is the Tidy Towns notion that towns need to be neat, trim and tidy but I believe it should be “Wild Biodiverse Towns”. We have a ways to go just yet, though. We have become detached from food to a certain extent - we have lost that relationship. Food is now something that is purchased in the supermarket. As Deputy McAuliffe said, food growing fed families and might have supplemented their incomes many years ago. We might see carrots on sale for 49 cent per kilo, but when we try to grow a kilo of carrots ourselves, we realise that there is a gap and someone is losing out badly if those carrots are on a shelf in the supermarket for 49 cent or whatever it might be. There is a great deal of work involved.

Not only is there the important communal aspect of community gardens – five-year-olds or six-year-olds can be out there gardening alongside their great-grandmothers, grandmothers or whatever they might be and sharing that skill set – but recreating connectivity with food is also a part of it. This is where our food comes from. It grows an awareness around biodiversity and the food chain. There is also the carbon aspect, in that anything that grows sucks in carbon. That is the natural cycle. There are a number of aspects through which this matter can be approached.

We are all behind this concept – the witnesses have heard many times that we all support it – but I want to discuss the practicalities of what we can do. We have examined the legal issues and I have jotted down a number of recommendations from the witnesses’ report and today’s discussion. If ten or 15 people approached a municipal district or local authority and said they wanted a community garden or allotments, what resistance would there usually be from the local authority?

Ms Maeve Foreman: My experience of Dublin City Council is that it would tell people to find a bit of land that it owned and for which it had no plans. Trying to identify potential growing spaces is something that it has included in its 2022-28 development plan.

Chairman: Let us tease that out. The council tells people that they can do it if they find a suitable bit of land. That is exactly what I have heard before. People go searching but they cannot find any, or if they return with three or four options, they are told that those lands have been earmarked for something else or the council is not quite sure what it is doing with that road over the next 20 years, for example, so it cannot do anything there. Is Ms Foreman saying that we should put the onus on the local authority to say where the land is? It would be plan led rather than community garden developer led.

Ms Maeve Foreman: Dublin City Council identified the land. It is then a question of finding a local group willing to work with the council to work that land. The examples we gave of areas, such as Back Lane in Killester and Mucky Lane in Donnycarney, were underutilised

places that residents themselves identified.

Chairman: In all our localities, we know of little spaces, patches of ground and various sites that would be great for growing. When the land is found, what other sort of resistance comes back? Is there resistance from residents in the area who say they do not want allotments there? What has the experience been?

Ms Maeve Foreman: In our situation, the land we identified was zoned residential but is an awkward, small site surrounded by houses. We had to get a petition signed by all the residents who were potentially going to be affected by having that site developed as a garden to show their support for it. The council wanted to know we were an organised group. We had to have a committee, a constitution, public liability insurance in place and a bank account. We had to prove our worth as an organised group before the council was willing to work with us.

When people approach Community Gardens Ireland saying they want to start a garden and have identified a potential site, we have loads of information on our website to help them get organised so they are an acceptable entity for the local authority to deal with.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: I will address a few things. On the biodiversity side, the very last page of the document was designed on purpose. It shows a sunflower I grew in my plot, which has three different types of pollinators on it. I am calling that out as one of the things we included for that purpose. We believe there is a massive biodiversity benefit. It is not just us. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in its report yesterday, called out community gardens as a beneficial action for climate change and everything else.

On planning, I am aware the Oxford urban farming workshop, held at the start of January, had speakers from France who came from a different level with a more top-down approach. As social enterprises, they performed reviews of cities and then went to local authorities to say these were the lands they believed were available for community growing. There are a number of different ways of going about it. What Ms Foreman has described is local authorities generally saying, "Great, off you go". We are aware that the Land Development Agency website has the State land database on it, which has been useful to send to some community groups, where people are able to see what State-owned land is in their local areas, whether it is CIÉ land or anything else.

Ms Foreman has probably covered most of the major issues. We are, however, aware of one thing that came from the group. We had regular meetings with Social Farms and Gardens in Northern Ireland to consider different issues and to explore how we work together. One of the issues that came up in the North and the South was the lack of availability in getting a bank account, which can be a challenge for some community groups. It is worthwhile calling that out as a potential blocker that could be in place.

Ms Maeve Foreman: Did we say we are working with Social Farms and Gardens in Northern Ireland? We got a small grant from the Community Foundation for Ireland to develop cross-Border networking collaboration. One of the things we hope to do is map all the existing allotments and growing projects on the island of Ireland. We have a lot on our map and its map but we are going to try to pull it all together so we have a sense of what is there.

Chairman: It is very important. There has been a lot of talk of energy resilience in the past couple of days and weeks, but that kind of food resilience is also an issue. I am not saying people will be able to feed their entire family from their allotment over the year, but there is the

healthy growing aspect of it, people growing their own food and bringing it home. There is a certain sort of-----

Ms Maeve Foreman: It tastes better too.

Chairman: It does. Even if it does not, people think so anyway because there is an inherent, basic thing about people growing their own food, bringing it home, cooking it and eating it.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I have a few comments rather than any questions. It seems to me this is one of those issues where, with a relatively small amount of work at Government and local government level, we could make many big advances. I know Deputy McAuliffe was not being negative in any way, but I do not think very complicated legislation is needed. A legislative basis could be created with some simple amendments to the Local Government Act or the Planning and Development Acts. We all know that local authorities like the comfort of a legislative provision to empower them to do something. That seems to be a very simple proposition our committee could support.

Second, there is a requirement for this to be in the county development plans. It should not just be discretionary. If every county development plan was required to have a set of propositions and principles, and a strategy, for more community growing spaces, then they would have to be there. Our difficulty is those plans are about to be concluded. Our local authorities start their final meetings tonight so we have missed that boat, but there can be amendments.

The crucial things are how we empower communities in already settled areas to get access to the land and how we make sure that as new settlements are put in place this is taken into account. I propose we consider two simple things. It is increasingly the practice of local authorities that are doing social housing projects to have an additional fund for the wider community to, in essence, compensate either for the loss of an amenity or the disruption of the new-build period. It is a very good idea that communities get some additional traffic calming or some goalposts or whatever but, in fact, what communities often want is more resources. If some space is taken up by housing, they want some *quid pro quo*. Community growing spaces would be such a sensible thing to include. Every local authority housing project or approved housing body project should have to actively consider where this area needs, and could sustain, such a space and what it would be like. Communities could then be involved in the consultation around where and what that would be and how it would enhance the area in order that existing communities would not feel all they were getting was more houses and more urban congestion. They would be getting an additional resource. Given we will have increasing - although nowhere near as much as I would like - volumes of social and affordable housing projects, making sure that at the minimum all such developments have to consider the community growing space option would be a very interesting idea. We already require them to consider play spaces, sports spaces and open green spaces. It is almost adding this into one of the things. That would be eminently sensible.

Beyond that, there is a very strong argument that speaks to Deputy Gould's point. Certainly, the three of us are very strong advocates of compact growth in our urban centres for all the reasons we know that it is required. We are getting some public and private developments where rooftop gardens, rooftop pollinators and open green spaces are already being put in, but are not for others. Again, one of the things we could usefully recommend at a discussion in private session is to set the horizon higher for those inner urban areas. We know from Dublin city that there is very little vacant public land but there will be lots of development land, which will shake up the fabric of the urban environment. If we placed a higher demand on public and

private developments in Cork city centre and Dublin city centre to have a greater focus on this, it would enhance those neighbourhoods.

It is important we do not just have a meeting where we agree with each other. It would be a good idea if the Chairman, who has a good read of this issue, could take on a draft letter to the Minister, which we could then discuss and make some amendments to in private session next week. It is a thing that would be relatively straightforward for the Government to work into the fabric of other work it is doing this year. It could be a positive outcome for the committee and Community Gardens Ireland.

Deputy Thomas Gould: It was brought to my attention during lockdown that there could be a green space in the area where I live, Gurrabraher, in addition to Farranree, similar to what we would probably see in London. A green space is normally in front of houses that are facing a square but in the case of Gurrabraher and Farranree it is actually at the back of houses. What has happened is that people have put up fences and walls around their houses and there are now green islands trapped in the back. The intention was that the local community whose houses back onto those green spaces would use them. Whether it was due to antisocial behaviour or privacy issues, people have built walls and fences and now those spaces just lie idle. It is a shame. I have contacted Cork City Council about it. Some people have taken ownership and made their gardens bigger. We are really losing out on the whole community aspect and it is something we should consider. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many of the local authorities and many areas of government became more flexible. An example is the St. Mary's orthopaedic hospital campus, which put in a Slí na Sláinte during the height of the restrictions. That location is less than a kilometre from my house and it is a place where people could go with their families and not have to meet anybody but they could see people. They have now stopped cutting back sections of it because of biodiversity concerns. The back of my father's house is up against the old hospital and people always wanted to have that part cut back. This demonstrates how people are changing attitudes.

In Churchfield, not far from where I live, there is an allotment that Cork City Council set up approximately 15 years ago. It is a tremendous success and people have called me saying they would love to get space in the allotment or asking if their community could get an allotment like it. It is a great model and it is a pity there are not more of them. The council has done good work there and I do not know if there is a funding issue. It was a green piece of land that the council owned. It is right next to Scoil Padre Pio and the nursery so the kids looking out have a park, a playground and allotments. That is what people want growing up and what they want to look at from a school window.

I had a meeting last week with some representatives of the Clogheen and Kerry Pike community association. They have a community park and are looking for some funding to put in a community garden. Councillors Kenneth Collins, Mick Nugent and I met those representatives last Saturday about Ballycannon Park, which is named after six volunteers who were killed in the War of Independence. They are looking to put the community park right where the volunteers were killed. Cork City Council has put in benches, one for each of the volunteers, but now they are looking for a community garden. There is a Slí na Sláinte and the group is also looking for the location to have an area for biodiversity.

There is great work being done by communities. I am talking about a great community with many volunteers who are doing work and funding. Not all community groups would have the organisational support that Clogheen and Kerry Pike would have. We can see what they are doing in the community and they are really doing well. We cannot have other communities be-

ing left behind. I commend the group on the work it is doing but with anything we do we must ensure there is action right across the board.

Chairman: Deputy Ó Broin made some very good suggestions in his contribution and I have been jotting down some notes of recommendations arising in the discussion. There is the affordability perspective as well. We have spoken about local authorities having public land and we have said that when we densify, we should have green open spaces. Maybe we could start calling them green growing spaces or something like that. We see areas being called “public open spaces” but perhaps a portion should be for public open space for kids to kick a ball around and another portion can be a public growing space. There could be little tweaks in design standards contained in county plans.

There may be private land available on the outskirts of a town, for example, that is not used. The owners might want to offer it as allotments. Does it become unaffordable in such cases or is it very much open to the group to negotiate with a landowner, for example, about putting 20 allotments on land? I know there are other issues, including parking and water access etc.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: It depends on the landowner. One issue we see as beneficial for the public side versus private is the inclusion of a definition of affordability. I am not sure how to define that. In Germany they benchmark this against the cost of agricultural land; it is four times the cost of agricultural land or something similar to that. They still look at some type of model out there.

The whole point is that this is something that was lost in the 1934 Act. Some local authorities include some basis of affordability and South Dublin County Council includes in its allotment process a factor if somebody is unemployed or a pensioner, and they have reduced costs to pay versus the general public. I am not sure what is the answer with affordability but we must have some measure of it. My fear is that over time the local authorities may increase costs when times get hard again because there could be massive demand. Private suppliers may also increase to a level that would limit the point of doing this. We are here looking to get as many people growing as possible. That is why we call the report Let’s Get Growing.

We want some type of benchmark for the private lands. Comparing English and Irish prices, for example, there are plots in some parts of Newcastle where the cost could be £20 or £30 per year for a plot of 250 sq. m. That would not be got in Ireland. We never had much emphasis put on affordability and that is really what we are looking for in the first place.

Chairman: It is an interesting angle. There are many green spaces and people with land that is not zoned on the outskirts of town. From a practical perspective, they need water supplied but what else is needed? Do people require storage and sheds? Can these areas operate without that?

Ms Maeve Foreman: Again, it is hard to generalise because there are so many models. Some of the more established allotments on private or public land would see the allotment holder install his or her own shed. The provider of the land often provides water sources, with taps that people can access. People could also have rain barrels and if they have a shed, a rain barrel can operate off that. At Pearse College in Crumlin there are allotments on land that it owns and they have provided some storage facilities and communal composting facilities. That is perhaps a good model as the college gives over some of its land. I am not sure what is the cost of the allotments there. I think they vary from approximately €80 to €120 per year.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: There are also private allotments. I remember reading before that an allotment could be €350 per year. It goes back to the affordability element. That is going a bit too far.

Chairman: Definitely. I have a final point. The witnesses have said there are 100 community gardens and allotments in the country. What helps to get political momentum going is lobbying and contacting councillors, especially around development plans, as well as Deputies and Senators. When public opinion pushes in a direction, politics tends to follow. I have no doubt the group would get good responses from everybody, although maybe not action. If the process gains momentum, the group could at least work with the good response and ask people to get behind it. There may be more than 100 gardens.

Ms Maeve Foreman: There are now approximately 120 on our map, with social farms and gardens having between 70 and 90. I do not have the figures with me.

Chairman: There are probably many people operating out there who are afraid to stick up their head in case somebody wonders about a community garden that nobody knew about. I will go briefly through some points. I can put together something. Deputy Ó Broin is right that we can work on this as a committee. We are looking at the planning code and process and there is an ongoing assessment of that. There may be an opportunity in that to seek some of these elements. On legislation, I know there was a recent public consultation on county development plans and what should be included in them. I do not know if the witnesses had the opportunity to make a submission.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: Not on the overall one but we have done it for the local one taking in Dublin City Council. We did not get a chance to make a submission on the overall consultation.

Chairman: Sure. Perhaps the committee can help with that. I do not know what role we would have. The consultation was about what should be contained in county development plans. Local authorities should have waiting lists.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: Yes.

Chairman: A section in policy, whether it is a county development plan or another policy, should be for community gardens and allotments.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: Community growing.

Chairman: Below that we would have communities, so community growing.

Ms Maeve Foreman: It should be visible on their websites. Someone visiting their website who searches “community gardens and allotments” should find a page there with the relevant information.

Chairman: In regard to a timeline, Mr. McCormack recommends five years.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: Benchmarking the Scottish changes that were made five years seems reasonable but, hopefully, it would be much less.

Chairman: It might be better to do it in six years because that is the timeline for the local area plans and county development plans. That is something to consider. Reference was made to having skills within the local authorities. That would be nice. It may not be necessary, but it

would probably be very beneficial.

On the definition of “community garden”, should that come from the witnesses rather than Government?

Mr. Dónal McCormack: We can prepare that if needs be. Allotments are already defined. It makes sense for us to have community gardens defined as well. If we are defining one, why not the other?

Ms Maeve Foreman: The definition should be very broad.

Chairman: There was mention of permanent gardens and temporary gardens. Is that something that needs to be included in the definition as well?

Ms Maeve Foreman: Yes, because both are feasible.

Chairman: Could I leave it to the witnesses to come back to us on the definition of communal growing space and permanent and temporary gardens?

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: If we get into too much detail in our letter to the Minister, it will be almost like we are pre-empting the work. We need a letter that sets out a number of broad principles that are consistent with the Chairman’s recommendations and some of our conversation. We should be informing the Minister that we have had this really important conversation, that there was broad unanimity among the committee around particular themes and that we would like the Department to start doing some work on this in terms of legislation, policy and support. Otherwise, we will end up getting into definitions. If the Department and the Minister are going to do the work, one would assume then there would be subsequent conversations to go through all of that. I am trying to make the Chairman’s job easier in terms of drafting a letter.

Chairman: I do not think it is any harm to note the issues.

Ms Maeve Foreman: We are talking about community growing spaces in the broad sense.

Chairman: We have talked about the Local Government Act 2001 as being the place where, possibly, that legislative change needs to happen. A point was also made in regard to legislation on operation versus legislation to provide the space. We will have to be clear on that. We also talked about the design per population and what might be required in that regard, that this be provided for in county development plans and that social housing projects or private housing developments include within their design that communal growing aspect.

Mr. Dónal McCormack: We identified a 65-year gap in terms of an official figure for Ireland for the number of allotments and community gardens. We feel this is way too long a timeframe. We need a type of community garden-community growing census. Again, it could be done every five or ten years at a local authority level such that local authorities will know how many community growing spaces are in their local area. It allows for trending and so on. We think it would be very beneficial.

Chairman: Will Mr. McCormack elaborate on that point with regard to the 65-year gap?

Mr. Dónal McCormack: We identified in our report that 1955 was the last time an official figure is detailed on the Dáil record. There is a gap in that regard between 1955 and 2020 in the Local Government Management Agency report. A regular record, taken over five or ten years, would be very beneficial. It goes back to the idea of measuring outcomes, that is, without some

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sort of target we do not know where we are going.

Chairman: I understand. I will draft the letter and bring it forward at our private meeting either next week or the week after that. In the meantime, the witnesses are free to contact us on anything that occurs to them that they did not get to talk about today or was not raised with them.

The joint committee adjourned at 4.54 p.m. until 11 a.m. on Tuesday, 8 March 2022.