

Ballybane Community Organic Garden Project Review and Evaluation 2007



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1. Introduction and Background

This report concerns itself with the evaluation of the Ballybane Community Organic Garden Project that was undertaken in the latter half of 2007 by Nollaig Mc Guinness an independent consultant. The overall purpose of evaluation was to establish what benefits that the garden project, now in its second year (or cycle), was generating for the local community. Specifically the evaluation would look at:

- the participation of the local community directly in the development of the garden
- general community engagement and awareness of the garden project locally
- the work and inputs of the management group in the ongoing development of the garden project
- the need and scope for any changes, improvement and further development of the garden project in general

It was intended that the evaluation would allow the project promoters to better understand such key issues for the project as:

- why individuals were or were not directly engaging with the garden project
- what local people felt were the benefits of the garden to the community
- what the general level of interest was in the garden locally
- what approaches had worked well to date and why

Overall the evaluation would allow the project promoters to formally establish just how successful the garden project has been since inception and identify the general future direction of the project in terms of further development and activities.

2. Brief Overview of the Ballybane Community Organic Project

As part of the Galway Healthy Cities project an organic garden was developed in Ballybane. The project is a joint project between Galway City Council, HSE West, RAPID, NUI Galway, the VEC and Ballybane Mervue Community Development Project. The land is provided by Galway City Council and a gardener provides advice and information at each stage from preparing the land right through to harvesting. Foods grown include potatoes, cabbage, corn, lettuce, tomatoes, scallions, herbs and runner beans. Flowers are also grown in the garden.

Now in its third year the project has become well established and is starting to see real results. The garden has two open sessions every week where local participants carry out the work involved in developing and maintaining the garden. Every year the project has a Harvest Day where the local community come together to celebrate the gardens produce and its place in the local community in general.

The garden has developed cooking and nutrition classes using its produce with the support of Home Management and Community Nutrition Services HSE West. The project has linked in with the local crèche and is currently developing a composting scheme to involve people in the wider community.

3. Evaluation Process – The Methodology

The evaluation was undertaken by an independent researcher from June to November 2007. The methodology employed in the main involved direct consultation with people who were and who had previously been actively involved in the work of the garden. Specifically this involved:

- working on site with those people who had become actively involved in the work of the garden through its weekly sessions
- telephone consultations with individuals who had previously been involved in the garden in its first year

Informal consultations were also undertaken with people who attended the gardens annual Harvest Day in September.

Finally, a number of meetings were also held with the management group to discuss the progress of the evaluation and other key issues in the ongoing development of the project.

4. The Findings

The findings from the consultations undertaken are now presented here. These are divided into General Observations and Views of Participants. The General Observations deal with the generic development of the garden as a project and its achievements and are based on all of the work undertaken by the researcher i.e. work with the participants, discussions with people from local community, discussions with the project promoters, review of any relevant literature etc.

The Views of Participants deal more specifically with what those people who have become actively involved in the garden had to say, their experiences and motivations, and their recommendations for the future of the garden.

4.1 General Observations

Before listing any general observations it must be stated just how positively, without exception, the Ballybane Community Organic Garden Project is viewed locally. In terms of the views of local people, people from outside the area, those working in the local development, the wider community sector, and the general press that the project has received. The project is viewed as an outstanding success and an important community resource. This is obviously an important finding and the issue is discussed in further detail in the Conclusions section.

i. The Garden as a Community Facility

Without stating the obvious it must be noted that the project has been successful in developing an important, new and different community facility or resource in the Ballybane area i.e. the garden itself. In the short space of 3 years the project has developed a very visible, attractive and some days a very busy community garden which is undoubtedly a major infrastructural enhancement to the local area.

ii The Garden and Community Development

The scope for the garden to be much more than simply a garden but rather a catalyst for a range of community development type activities is immense. Indeed the garden project has already shown this and the project promoters have shown a real commitment to developing this aspect of the project in the future. For example in its first fully operational year the garden directly recruited many of its regular participants from a local men's group. The scope is clearly there for the project to directly engage and set up specific activities with other groups from the community e.g. older people, youth, people with disabilities schools etc.

iii. The Garden and Healthy Lifestyles

The garden is clearly an important and 'live' resource in promoting healthy lifestyles for the local community. It provides and promotes opportunities for simple outdoor exercise suitable for all people. In addition to getting exercise, participants are also learning about healthy diet and growing their own vegetables etc. The project has further shown the extent of the scope for promoting healthy living through the garden by developing cooking and nutrition classes with the support of HSE West's Home Management and Community Nutrition Service. In addition the project has produced food on the annual Harvest Day using the gardens produce.

iv. Social and Community Aspect to the Garden

In addition to the garden enhancing the local community infrastructure in Ballybane it is also becoming an important 'community point' providing an informal space for local people to meet and socialise through gardening. This has taken time to build but during the past year this aspect of the garden has clearly continue to grow. With the recent enhancements to the appearance of the garden and the provision of a seating area it is likely that the garden will increasingly become a place for local people to 'pop into' for a look and a chat. The impressive turn out at the annual Harvest Day was clear evidence of this.

v. The Project Partnership

The partnership involved in developing the Ballybane Community Organic Garden Project has undoubtedly been key to the overall success of the project. This partnership of the local Community Development Project, Local Authority, Health Promotion, and VEC in addition to the additional expertise brought in has shown that the correct supports have been in place for the project to develop and succeed in a short space of time. In addition to the project being sufficiently resourced to date and effectively managed this group has shown real vision as to what a community garden can and should be. Most of the potentials for improvement and new project ideas identified during the evaluation had already been well considered and were either being carried out or are likely to be implemented in the near future.

4.2 Views of Participants

As with the general observations it is worth noting that the views of participants were overwhelmingly positive in all aspects. Their opinions, experiences and recommendations are discussed here under 3 separate headings.

i. Benefits of the Community Garden

The views expressed by the people who have been actively involved in the garden were very consistent in what they see as the benefits of the garden to both the individual and the wider community. The benefits and issues identified are also consistent with those presented under the general observations.

First and foremost all participants saw real value in the **health dimension** to getting involved in the garden i.e. it provided regular healthy activity for them. Many highlighted the fact that gardening is very doable and not too strenuous a form of exercise.

Secondly all participants also value the **social aspect** to the garden. They enjoyed simply meeting other people at the garden and socialising while working.

Most participants also highlighted the **learning aspect** to their participation in the garden. They valued the fact that they were learning through this activity – learning about gardening, growing techniques, maintenance, different vegetables and plants etc.

In terms of benefits to the wider community all participants were in agreement that the garden was a welcome addition to the local area; that it is a 'nice feature' that will generate a type of civic pride amongst the local community; that it will probably encourage people to get involved more in gardening; and that it provides a new and different social space for the community and is likely to continue to grow as a focal point for the community over time.

ii. Engaging with the Community

Those consulted with were asked how and why they got involved in the garden and how they felt the garden and its use should be best promoted with the local community.

The question as to why people got involved in the garden in the first place produced mixed results. Some people clearly had **an interest in gardening** and so this was their main motivation. For others the idea of some **group activity** in the garden appealed to them, while for others it was just a general curiosity as to what was going on and if it might interest them that brought them to the garden in the first place.

The question as to how they got involved; where they heard about it also produced mixed results. Several people had heard about the garden through **word of mouth** in the locality. Others had seen it firstly in either the **leaflet or newsletter issues locally**. Several people, particularly those in the first year had been **spoken to directly** about getting involved by someone involved in the project.

In terms of peoples views as to how the garden should be promoted with the local community there was more consistency here. Most people felt that **flyers and/or posters should be circulated locally from time to time** encouraging people to get

involved in the garden. Most also felt that the garden would promote itself over time and that general community interest will continue to grow. Initially many pointed out that the appearance of the garden could be improved to make it more inviting and visitor friendly however it must be noted here that significant and well received enhancements were made after that in time for Harvest Day.

iii. Recommendations for the Future

The main recommendation for the future of the garden coming from those who have been directly involved in it is to keep it going as it is highly valued in its current status.

However people were forthcoming in making suggestions for the future of the garden. These included:

- expanding the size of the garden; either double the size or at least half again
- expanding the opening hours of the garden; more than the 2 existing weekly open session; possibly open for a few hours at the weekend
- look at the possibility of having a community market using the garden produce
- try to get more young people visiting the garden through local schools and youth clubs
- look at the possibility of introducing bee-keeping to the garden

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Ballybane Community Organic Garden has generated a great deal of positive feedback. As can be seen from the previous section this evaluation endorses this and has found the project to be nothing short of an outstanding success. The project has delivered an important new community facility that has tangible social benefits and has already identified the scope for additional associated community development initiatives.

At a number of stages during the evaluation the researcher highlighted the difficulty in finding any weakness or problem with the project. Where any weaknesses were identified there were generally already being dealt with by the project promoters.

It would appear that the project reached a stage of maturity during 2007 where all of the various elements have come together and put the garden and wider project in good shape for the future. 2007 saw the physical enhancement of the garden making it more inviting and usable for the community. The garden itself has matured with a now impressive array of vegetables, herbs and flowers. And finally the level of awareness and genuine interest in the garden locally would appear to have grown considerably over the past year.

Given all of the positive findings listed here the only concern for the future of the project would be that the necessary resources are in place for the project to continue to grow and build on its success.

5.1 Recommendations

The report concludes with a number of recommendations for the project that are aimed at consolidating its current positive position and allowing the project to move forward in a progressive manner.

i. Expansion of the Garden

The project promoters should now give serious consideration to the physical expansion of the garden on its current site. This will obviously allow for an increase in the amount and variety of vegetables and plants grown in the demand. However and perhaps more importantly, it will allow for the garden to cope with the growing increase in interest from the community and allow the garden to incorporate more community spaces. In line with this the promoters need to consider opening the garden more often.

ii. Resources

It is imperative that the necessary resource inputs into the project are maintained and where required, increased. Given the considerable community benefit that the garden is already showing the overall project can be said to represent real value for money and this should not be lost sight of. The human resources that have made this project success are vital. It is essential that the gardening expertise is maintained. It is equally important that the ongoing input of the Community Development Project is maintained as this provides the direct link to the local community that is essential.

iii Engaging the Community

In addition to maintaining the direct involvement of the CDP it is recommended that community engagement can be strengthened in a number of ways referred to already. In terms of general promotion, flyers and posters can be circulated from time to time as suggested by participants. It is also recommended that at least one, possibly two local community volunteers join the management group to assist with the ongoing monitoring and development of the garden. Finally in relation to the scope for additional community development initiatives as discussed earlier it is important that the project promoters keep the open mind and open door policy that they have shown already in this respect. They are in a good position to take a proactive approach to working with the wider community whether this involves developing new initiatives through the garden with specific groups or simply promoting the use of the garden to all groups.

iv. The Project Partnership

The project partnership has clearly worked very well to date and it is recommended that it remains in place in its current formation (with the addition of the local volunteers as mentioned). Particularly key partners to this project would appear to be HSE Health Promotion (Healthy Cities), the Local Authority (RAPID), and Ballybane Mervue CDP and its important that these partners remain committed to the future of the project.