

Community Food Growing and Covid-19: early impact survey

April 2020



Credit- Zoe Warde Aldam

Introduction

In April 2020, Sustain compiled a survey for community gardens and city farms to assess their responses to the Covid-19 pandemic sent out through Capital Growth and Good to Grow networks. They received 113 responses in just over a week with most respondents from community gardens in London (70%) but many others from across the UK covering Aberdeen, Exeter, Preston and Gortin, N. Ireland.

'I look forward to hearing your report from this to help us and other gardens out with advice! Guidance I would share: Keep getting outside in safe ways, and garden if you can, following social distancing measures. More than ever, gardening can provide relief, and improve health and wellbeing'

The report shows that many gardens have quickly adapted to the pandemic with additional safety measures, that 70% will continue to grow food at this critical time and highlights the support that they would benefit from including online advice and signposting

Key findings

1. What type of garden and who is the landowner?

We asked garden leaders which organisations they were from, and who their landowners were.

The majority were Local Authority allotments or community gardens, community gardens in housing estates or community gardens in local parks. The remaining including City farms, privately owned land community gardens and Primary schools.

2. Where in the country are the gardens that responded?

73% were in London and 26% nationwide covering Aberdeen, Exeter, Preston and Gortin, N. Ireland.

3. Status of during lockdown

Gardens were asked if they were open or closed

- Some gardens are closed completely (39%), others are open with social distancing measures in place.
- Some gardens responded that they were closed only to volunteers/visitors but open to staff, and others responded that they only have a small team of staff still coming in to maintain.
- All gardens responded that their events/activities/training had been cancelled or postponed.

They were also asked whether they planned to grow food this season.

- Almost 70% of all gardens who were surveyed said they **will** continue to grow/harvest food this season where feasible.
- Around 18% said they would but much less than usual, and a few gardens said they wouldn't or weren't yet sure what their plans were.
- A few gardens said they would be aiming on growing much **more** this season and being more productive if they can.

4. The effect of Covid-19 on community gardens and organisations.

This open ended question highlighted a number of positive responses as well as concerns that the lockdown and social distancing is having on community gardens.

visitors home access visit able allowed open longer currently isolated manage part time
meant gardening sessions School closed public local distancing hold One safe
food guidelines closed services group site sessions team go Unable
seeds usually cancelled stopped activities run work
staff people now closed volunteers support garden
one volunteer keep Reduced community needing will coming
growing help project events plants planned school individual
now two social distancing look sites crops maintained park week water
continuing using shut maintenance attend walk members grow food allotments
food growing still including community garden key workers close garden many

a) Covid-19 adaptations in place

A number of gardens reported adapting including:

- Gardens implementing social distancing measures, or no shared tools
- No shared communal activities
- Physically distancing but some gardens are offering online support/training to volunteers/beneficiaries who are in isolation

These are covered further down (see XXX)

b) Volunteers and garden members

While some gardens were completely closed with no maintenance, others were closed to volunteers/visitors but open to members/staff, with some reporting reduced team attending to some sites. Respondents raised the issue of continuing to engage volunteers as they are in social isolation – phone check ins, online training etc. Many were concerned about the effect on physical and mental health of volunteers and staff, including

- Concerns about social isolation and reduction in mental health
- Concerns about reduction in access to green space and nature
- Uncertainty over future
- Staff/volunteers who can work in garden are struggling physically with amount of work to do

c) Other implications for gardens

The most common concern was the implication of reduced people power and the impact this will have on the gardens due to lack of volunteers/staff or being closed, meaning that watering and maintenance rotas are diminished.

For some this also has an impact on income e.g. no social or therapeutic gardening sessions will be appropriate at this time, so seeking funding that will instead prioritize food growing as fundable.

The other key concern was shortage of basic gardens necessities (soil, seeds etc)

i. Larger, staffed food production gardens

Some specific issues were raised about whether volunteers are key workers particularly for larger food growing enterprise gardens need volunteer or unpaid trainee labour to harvest food to be sold or donated.

'We have lots to do and are unsure whether unpaid trainees can count as key workers. Clarification would be really good'

There were also concerns around losing income due to reduction in labour for food production, but also other income such as farm/animal hire, events, corporate days, selling plants etc.

'We are now scrambling to find funding to cover the usual areas that come to us in the summer months – school visits, mobile farms and corporate challenge days'

ii. Schools

There were also some specific issues raised by schools, where they are closed to all but key worker's children. This means there is a skeleton staff now who may or may not be engaged with the school garden and concerns about watering schedules in gardens if schools get closed completely.

One school has small pots left aside for children to collect with no contact and grow their own at home.

5. What are gardens doing to adapt to the impact of Coronavirus on garden and on staff/volunteers/beneficiaries?

The most common responses were

- Limited access to garden/reduced staff/volunteers (often only 1-2 people at a time)
- Cleaning tools/gloves/equipment/frequently touched surfaces
- Increased hand washing practices
- Assigned individual tools, equipment etc
- Use of gloves/protective gear
- Refreshments not to be shared
- Anyone with symptoms or living with someone with symptoms not to attend, and to follow government guidelines around self-isolating.

6. What should Good to Grow/Capital Growth networks do to support gardens at this time?

- Online advice/info and signposting (78%) E.g key worker queries/guidance on what is allowed, or where to find seeds, or how to keep connected to volunteers/beneficiaries at this time who might be struggling.
- Online forums/networks and to share and connect with other gardens (47%) E.g. Zoom meetings with other growers, skill/idea sharing, a way to just say 'hello' and keep connected.
- Support in lobbying/representing gardens to councils and landowners (51%) 'Please don't let our parks and growing spaces die', 'promote a different approach to councils where they allow 'weeds' and grasses to grow longer before cutting etc.', 'food growing is a necessity', 'Helping campaign for funding to be available for food growing – it looks unlikely that we will be able to depend on funding that is based on bringing groups of vulnerable people together for a sociable gardening experience'
- Online training (41%) on topics such as – skill sharing, herbs and cut and come again salad growing, growing in small spaces/inside, cooking what you grow, organic growing for beginners, using food scraps to grow food, using kitchen seeds to grow your own herbs., propagation techniques.
- A way of getting community involved, working with volunteers, getting food delivered to those in need
- Signposting to/collating sources of funding 'Our income stream is now zero (normally selling food and events, so need definite economic support to meet our running costs'
- Organise local outlets/forums to share resources, e.g. seeds, soil etc. 'Sources of seeds – especially if other groups want to trade or exchange', 'We need soil and seeds. We are currently planting the seeds of the vegetables and fruits we are eating'.

Other key quotes from the survey-

'A photo gallery of lovely plants/food growing/nature pictures could help keep people's spirits up'

[We would like Good to Grow to] 'Just keep saying hello'

Next Steps

Capital Growth and Good to Grow teams are currently responding to the issues and suggestions for support highlighted here. See <https://www.capitalgrowth.org/coronavirus/> for up to date responses

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