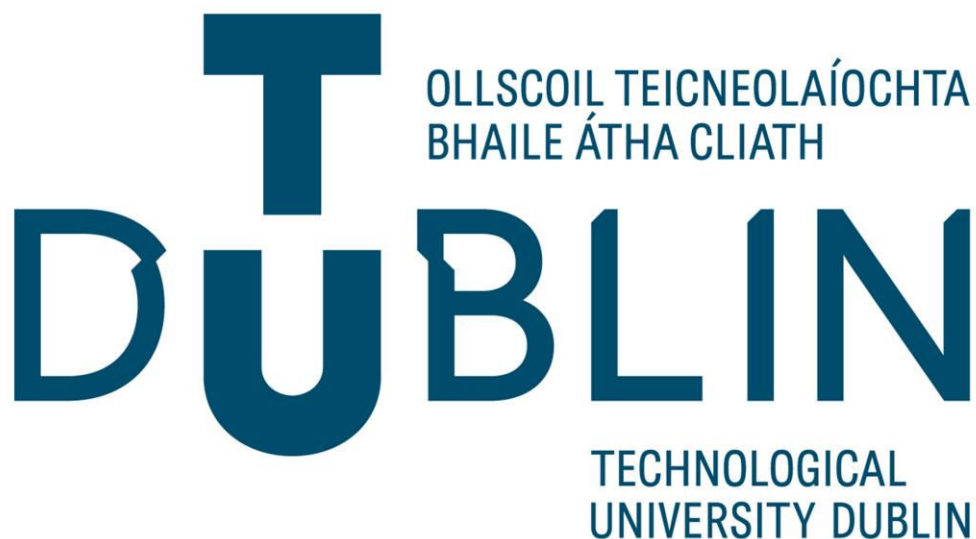


EVALUATION STUDY GLAS GARDEN BALLYMUN



'A proper little oasis in the middle of Ballymun'



Contents

1.0 Introduction.....	3
2.0 GAP	3
3.0 Community gardens	4
4.0 Methodology.....	5
5.0 Findings	6
5.1 Length of time using the service	6
5.2 Information about the garden	6
5.3 Reasons for coming.....	6
5.4 Benefits from using the garden	7
5.5 What have you learnt?.....	8
5.6 What does the garden mean to you?	9
6.0 Conclusions and recommendations.....	10
References.....	12
Appendix 1.....	14

1.0 Introduction

TU Dublin ran a series of workshops on impact measurement for Dublin City Council in March 2022 as part of the Ballymun regeneration project. As a follow up to this, Global Action Plan (Ireland) asked TU Dublin to conduct an impact assessment of the GLAS (Green Living & Sustainability) community garden.

There is a wide variety of users:

- a) 170 registered users - 140 of these are in direct provision

Asylum seekers are the main users and they derive a wide range of benefits from using the garden, as well as contributing to the garden. There are a small number of local residents who use the service, but they were not in attendance during any of our visits. In the findings below, these users will be referred to as daily users.

- b) Other users include:

- The Central Remedial Clinic
- St. Michael's House
- St. Vincent's Centre, Navan Road
- Young Ballymun

These organisations bring a number of service users to the garden as part of their programme of activities to engage their clients in a wide range of activities. In the findings below, these users will be referred to as social users.

- c) Local schools

The garden is actively engaged with local primary schools. The pupils visit the garden to learn more about food growing, plants and biodiversity.

2.0 GAP

Global Action Plan Ireland (GAP) is an environmental organisation with the mission to support sustainable communities across Ireland. GAP believe that 'all of us can make a difference' and assist and enable people to develop tangible actions that lead to lasting attitudinal development.

GAP provide targeted support to individuals, communities, schools and businesses, to encourage smart and effective citizen solutions to the climate and biodiversity crises (GAP, 2023).

GAP's 'Green Living & Sustainability Community Garden' (GLAS), located in Ballymun, and brings people of all ages and abilities together. The garden is socially inclusive, a space for participatory learning, and of active exploration of sustainability. It is key in helping interested individuals and groups to reduce their carbon footprint, to produce organic food, or simply to enable anyone to enjoy nature, plants and the outdoors, thus using the garden as a change space.

The evidence-based programmes run in the community garden are designed to enable individuals and communities and help them overcome barriers to change.

3.0 Community gardens

Community gardens are spaces, often in urban or peri-urban areas, that are cultivated for the purpose of growing food such as fruit, vegetables, herbs and other edibles. Many include a protected cropping space to extend the growing season, which doubles as a propagation facility and tea/social space to escape the variable Irish weather.

Traditionally, they are established and run by volunteers, and they offer those urban dwellers with limited outdoor space an area to garden, providing an alternative to the current food environment and in doing so provide much needed opportunities to gain contact with nature in an increasing urbanised environment (Egli, Oliver, and Tautolo, 2016).

Multiple studies indicate that the long-term health and wellbeing of individuals and communities is supported through gardening and food growing (Schmutz et al, 2014); regular involvement in gardening improves psychological health, increases physical activity, aids recovery and rehabilitation contributes to social interactions and community cohesion whilst the food growing improves attitudes to healthy eating (Schmutz 2014).

Studies in children suggest that nature-related activities positively impact not only psychosocial behaviour, but also the gut microbiota (Sobko, et al. 2020).

Additionally, children's educational attainment is positively impacted through gardening activity (Passy, Morris, Reid, 2010).

Community gardens are a space for intergenerational collaborative gardening, and act as effective local learning environments that promote physical, psychological wellbeing through community connection, particularly in areas of social disadvantage (Schmutz et al, 2014). Offering hands-on learning environments for diverse groups, these spaces welcome those experiencing social isolation, health and social inequality (Harris 2017).

Gardening, in and of itself, is shown to have a multitude of motivating factors, including economic, environmental, political, social, and nutritional (Hale et al, 2011).

Learning to grow fresh food in safe social spaces provides individuals with opportunities to increase awareness of their personal wellbeing and community life (Gray, Tracy, Truong and Ward 2022). In addition to this, the GLAS garden illustrates to users the value of growing your own food systems towards food security, and the reduction of the length of the food chain, food miles, both significant contributors to carbon emissions (Nicolétis et. al. 2019.).

4.0 Methodology

A semi-structured interview approach was used. The questions asked are outlined below in Appendix 1. This approach allows for the same questions to be asked in each interview but allows the flexibility to ask additional questions depending on the responses made during the interview.

The researchers visited the garden on three separate occasions and, in order to speak to as many users as possible, a focus group approach was used. The interviews lasted between 15-30 minutes, and the researchers spoke with eighteen people.

In relation to the social users, the researchers interviewed one of the groups and their care worker during one of the visits. The remaining users were interviewed by telephone using the questions outlined in appendix 1. A short interview with the GAP horticulturist in the garden using the question in Appendix 1.

5.0 Findings

The findings are based on the questions asked during the interviews. A copy of these questions is set out in appendix 1.

5.1 Length of time using the service

The first question asked was - How long have you been coming to the garden?

- For the daily users the answers indicated that most of the users were relatively recent with the majority coming to the garden for 2-4 weeks, and some for as long as 3 months. This was due to the regular movement of asylum seekers to new accommodation and the fact that asylum seekers are allowed to work after five months.
- For social users, they have been coming to the garden for over three years, and most of the schools have been involved with the garden since the beginning in 2012.

5.2 Information about the garden

The second question asked - How did you hear about the garden?

- The daily users heard about the garden through a variety of sources. These included social media, Dublin City Council, other people in their accommodation centre, and the I-Vol social media platform.
- Social users and schools became aware of the garden through its location or through 'word of mouth'.

5.3 Reasons for coming

The third question asked - Why do you come? A variety of answers were given to this question. For the daily users, the following were the key reasons for coming

- Help the community;
- Meet Irish people;
- Give back to / want to help the community - got involved with helping out in the local schools and organizing activities;
- Meet new people from different cultures;
- Likes gardening - can see the fruit of your labour;

- GLAS has been very welcoming, ‘Sharon is friendly and encouraging’;
- De-stress /relief from stress;
- To get space away from the centre, it's frustrating we do nothing, we eat we sleep;
- Digging and thinking, its relaxation;
- It gives you something to hope for.

For Social users, the key reasons were as follows:

- Looking for a meaningful role which is part of occupational therapy;
- Getting involved in the community;
- One key worker noted that *‘the lads love it here and have a real connection with Sharon’*;

For the schools, the main reasons for coming to the garden were as follows:

- Pupils love being outside and getting fresh air. It is a form of active learning which links into the curriculum;
- Coming to the garden promotes awareness of nature, and how to take care of plants;
- They have great pride and sense of ownership of the garden. They love to see things growing;
- It is a community resource which belongs to everyone. It reduces the possibility of damage being caused to a community resource;
- Pupils have a great sense of achievement when they see things grow.

5.4 Benefits from using the garden

The fourth question asked - What benefits are you getting from coming to the garden?

For daily users, the main benefits are as follows:

- Social interaction and feel that you are part of the community:
 - ‘You become ingrained in the community...you are asked ‘are you going to the garden today?’
 - ‘You chat and share experiences’
 - ‘I love the flowers they are the most beautiful thing’

- Reduced stress
- Fresh air
- Something to do especially when not working
- Physical exercise
- Seasonal learning of food, and to eat fresh produce

‘You get your hands dirty, and it shows the government you are willing to work’

For social users, the main benefits include the physical exercise and the social interaction, and a feeling that they are part of the community.

For the schools, the main benefits were:

- A useful tool in developing mindfulness. It is therapeutic. It gives pupils an opportunity to slow down and take a minute.

‘Time out to take a breath...Gives you headspace’

- It gives them an activity which they can do outside school.
- It is good for children who are not academic.
- It is a great opportunity to switch off.
- It offers something different to talk about and write about, and to draw.

5.5 What have you learnt?

The fifth question asked - what have you learnt?

For the daily users, the main things learnt were

- Learn about plants, flowers and the different seasons.
- Biodiversity and how it impacts on the environment.
- Learn more about Ireland.

For the schools, the main lessons were as follows:

- They learn about diversity and science. They gain an understanding about the cycle of life.

‘They gain an understanding of plants and how they can help bees’

- They gain an understanding about nature and the importance of the environment.
- They learn about different types of trees and plants.

5.6 What does the garden mean to you?

The sixth question asked - What does the garden mean to you?

For the daily users, the garden meant a variety of things to them. These are outlined as follows:

- Love flowers.
- Connecting with nature.
- You feel part of the community:
 - 'It taught me to give and not expect anything in return.'*
 - It is a time to relax - 'A place that gives you hope... you feel a connection to God. It is life'*
- Get fresh air.
- A place where people can come together.
- It feels good:
 - 'It means life.....who is going to make food if I don't do it.....to avoid starvation'*
 - 'The garden is like the heart in the community. Somewhere to stop by.'*

For the schools, the meaning was outlined in the following terms:

- Pupils would describe the garden in the following terms:
 - 'Our garden'*
 - 'You grow stuff'*
 - 'Have a great time'*
 - 'You have a great time... Fun...Enjoyment'*
 - 'You feel that you are part of the community'*
 - 'A happy place'*
 - 'A place to relax and unwind'*
- It is a community resource
 - 'It is a safe space for everyone'*

Appreciating the wide-ranging benefits of the garden to users, the GLAS Horticulturist working in the garden acknowledges the site has limited capacity, and sees a need for expanding the reach of the garden, which the research team concur with. Currently the garden is closed at weekends, therefore potentially, those residents working full time find it difficult to engage.

Given the post COVID upsurge of interest in gardening throughout Ireland with an almost 50% increase in fruit and veg spend (Pope 2021), there is the potential to increase to a wider user base, with an expansion of the garden and its activities.

6.0 Conclusions and recommendations

The garden, despite the limitation of opening hours, has become an important community resource which is open to all. The findings outlined above suggest that the current user groups are gaining huge benefits from the availability of the garden.

- For the daily users, it is a useful activity which allows them to meet other people and be active.
- For the social users, it is a huge part of their occupational therapy.
- For the schools, it allows the pupils to switch off from the academics and gives them an activity that they can undertake at home. In addition, it teaches about nature and the importance of biodiversity, and incorporates a more practical insight into some of the material that they are learning in the classroom. In addition, many of the schools have developed their own gardens, supported by GLAS.

The key success factors in developing a community garden are:

- 1) A piece of land;
- 2) A horticulturist who can combine gardening knowledge with the ability to work with people;
- 3) The availability and proximity of local groups.

Based on our research we would make the following recommendations

- Longer opening hours to meet the needs of a wider variety of users;
- More outreach to local community groups;

- There should be more widespread use of community gardens across urban areas using the current operating model of collaboration between GAP, Local authorities and other partners;
- Documenting this community garden model, including operational, funding and collaborative sources to share and enable creation of gardens in urban areas countrywide.
- The addition of a new programme with a focus on community collaborative food production is a suggestion made by the GLAS Horticulturist which is worthy of deeper consideration. This suggestion of a new programme (which could be modelled on the Greener Neighbourhood scheme currently run by GLAS with funding from Dublin City Council), would seek to engage users outside of the garden, in shared allotments and/or in private gardens, thus extending the activities of the garden, without the need to increase the footprint of the site in Ballymun. This scheme could be supported by a weekly gardening hands on education programme delivered by GLAS Horticulturists, enabling people to grow food themselves at home as individuals or in an allotment as a group, whilst developing their skills and confidence as gardeners and food growers through a shared community of practice among participants.

Lastly, it is clear that societal interventions such as the GLAS garden have a tangible method to positively impact individuals and society, therefore expansions of activities to enable increased and wider user engagement are worthy of support from all quarters.

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Appendix 1

Questions for GLAS volunteers

- 1) How long have you been coming to the garden?
- 2) How did you hear about the garden?
- 3) Why do you come?
- 4) What benefits are you getting from coming to the garden?
- 5) What have you learnt?
- 6) What does the garden mean to you?

Questions for GLAS Horticulturist

What are your views on the future for the garden and its volunteers?