Making Space for Change

The first 25 years of GAP Ireland

20 August 2026

Introduction

On 20 August 2026, Global Action Plan (GAP) Ireland marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of its incorporation as an independent Irish organisation. This milestone provided an opportunity not only to celebrate a significant anniversary, but also to reflect on a remarkable journey that began many years before formal incorporation and has continued to evolve in response to Ireland's changing environmental and social challenges.

Although incorporated in 2001, GAP Ireland's story reaches back to the late 1980s, when an international movement emerged from a simple but transformative idea: that lasting environmental progress depends not only on governments, legislation and technological innovation, but also on the everyday choices people make and the support they receive to make those choices possible.

From those international beginnings, through its early voluntary work in Ireland, its rebirth in Ballymun, and its subsequent development into a national environmental charity, GAP has consistently demonstrated that meaningful environmental action is rooted in people, communities and participation.

The organisation's history mirrors wider changes in how sustainability has been understood over the past four decades. When GAP was founded internationally in 1989, environmental organisations were often concerned primarily with conservation, pollution and resource management.

> **GAP introduced a different perspective, recognising that sustainable societies would ultimately depend on people's willingness and ability to adopt new ways of living.**

This emphasis on practical behaviour change, supported by learning, collaboration and community, would become the defining characteristic of the organisation's work internationally and, later, in Ireland. In Ireland, those principles found particularly fertile ground.

Beginning with the establishment of Global Action Plan Ireland as a voluntary initiative in 1995, surviving the closure of that first organisation in 1999, and finding new purpose through the regeneration of Ballymun in 2000, GAP's development was never straightforward. Its history is one of resilience as much as growth; a story of people who recognised the close relationship between environmental sustainability, social inclusion and community development, and who worked to translate that understanding into practical action.

Over the following twenty-five years, GAP Ireland expanded steadily from its origins in a single community to become a national organisation working with schools, community groups, businesses, local authorities and public bodies across Ireland. Along the way, it developed programmes that have enabled thousands of people to engage with climate action, biodiversity, sustainable living, nature connection, community gardening and global citizenship.

While the organisation's activities have diversified considerably, its central purpose has remained remarkably consistent: supporting people to become active participants in creating a more sustainable and equitable society.

This document traces that journey chronologically. It tells the story of the individuals who helped establish the organisation, the partnerships that sustained it, and the communities that shaped its distinctive approach.

The story of how GAP Ireland developed over the past quarter century provides important insight into why the organisation continues to occupy a distinctive place within Ireland's environmental sector today.

> **GAP's contribution lies not simply in the programmes it has delivered or the partnerships it has formed, but in demonstrating that environmental sustainability and social wellbeing are mutually reinforcing, and that lasting change is achieved when people are equipped with confidence, trust and the opportunity to act together.**

A world ready for change: GAP's International origins (1989–1995)

Global Action Plan (GAP) emerged at a moment when environmental awareness was entering a new phase. During the late 1980s, scientific understanding of climate change, biodiversity loss and resource depletion was growing rapidly, while governments around the world were beginning to recognise that environmental protection would require unprecedented international cooperation. Yet alongside these developments came an equally important realisation: public policy and technological innovation would not be enough. Lasting environmental progress would also depend on the everyday decisions made by millions of people in their homes, workplaces and communities.

It was against this backdrop that Global Action Plan was established in 1989 in the United States and the Netherlands by **David Gershon** and **Bessie Schadee**. Both recognised that while governments could create enabling policies and businesses could develop cleaner technologies, the transition to more sustainable societies would ultimately depend upon people having the knowledge, confidence and support to change the way they lived. Their vision was ambitious but practical: to create an international movement that would help ordinary people become active participants in addressing environmental challenges rather than passive recipients of environmental messages.

Central to this vision was the development of **the Household EcoTeam programme**. Rather than relying on awareness campaigns alone, EcoTeams brought together small groups of households to learn from one another while making practical changes to everyday habits. Participants explored issues such as energy use, water conservation, waste reduction and sustainable consumption, sharing experiences and encouraging one another as they adopted new practices.

The significance of the EcoTeam model lay not in the environmental actions it promoted, but in the way those actions were achieved.

By working together in small groups, participants discovered that change was easier to sustain when it was supported by shared learning, mutual encouragement and practical experience. This collaborative approach challenged the assumption that environmental responsibility was solely an individual matter, demonstrating instead that lasting behaviour change could be promoted through community, trust and collective endeavour.

The international community soon began to recognise the importance of this approach. The Household EcoTeam programme was presented at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, **the Earth Summit**, in Rio de Janeiro, one of the defining environmental gatherings of the twentieth century. At this conference that helped establish sustainable development as a global priority, the EcoTeam model offered a practical example of how international ambitions could be translated into meaningful action by citizens in their everyday lives.

By the mid-1990s, early evaluations of the programme were demonstrating encouraging results. Research undertaken at the University of Leiden confirmed that participants were successfully adopting more sustainable behaviours over time, helping establish EcoTeams as the foundation of Global Action Plan's work internationally.

This growing evidence base distinguished GAP from many environmental initiatives of the period, reinforcing its belief that behaviour change was most effective when people combined practical knowledge with social support and opportunities to learn from one another.

As the movement expanded, Global Action Plan established national organisations across Europe and beyond, adapting its methods to different social and cultural contexts. The organisation's international network became a forum through which ideas, programmes and experience were exchanged across national boundaries, enabling successful initiatives developed in one country to inform practice elsewhere. This spirit of international collaboration would prove decisive in the emergence of GAP in Ireland.

The international origins of Global Action Plan also established principles that would remain central to the organisation's identity for decades to come.

From the outset, GAP Ireland rejected the notion that environmental problems could be solved solely through expert knowledge or technical innovation. Instead, it argued that people themselves were an essential part of the solution, provided they were given opportunities to participate, to learn together and to experience that their actions could make a meaningful difference.

These ideas were quietly radical. Long before terms such as *behaviour change*, *community resilience* and *citizen engagement* became common in environmental policy, Global Action Plan was demonstrating that sustainable living could be encouraged through participation rather than prescription, collaboration rather than instruction, and practical action rather than abstract exhortation.

Although these principles were developed within an international movement, they would soon find a distinctive expression in Ireland. There, shaped by local circumstances and the experience of communities facing profound social as well as environmental challenges, they would evolve into an

approach that connected sustainability with participation, inclusion and social justice in ways that the organisation's founders could scarcely have anticipated.

Bringing Global Action Plan to Ireland (1989–1999)

The story of Global Action Plan Ireland did not begin with the incorporation of a company or the launch of a formal programme. Like many community initiatives, it began with the commitment of individuals who recognised that global environmental concerns required local action.

One of those individuals was **Audrey Dickson**, whose contribution would prove pivotal in bringing Global Action Plan to Ireland. In 1989, while attending an international conference in Moscow, Dickson became increasingly convinced that environmental challenges demanded greater public engagement as well as political action. Inspired by those discussions, she returned to Ireland and established the **Women's Environmental Network (WEN)**, creating a forum to raise awareness of environmental issues and encourage practical action at community level.

Through her growing international contacts, Dickson was introduced to members of Global Action Plan Germany. The organisation's practical, community-based approach strongly resonated with her own vision for environmental action in Ireland. Rather than focusing solely on campaigning or public awareness, Global Action Plan offered a model that enabled people to work together to make tangible changes in their everyday lives.

This connection led to the establishment of Global Action Plan Ireland in 1995, six years before the organisation's eventual incorporation. Operating on a voluntary basis from modest offices in Dublin's Carmichael Centre, the fledgling organisation relied heavily on volunteers and Community Employment participants to introduce **the Green Living Programme**, based on the international EcoTeam model, to Irish households and communities.

Resources were limited, but enthusiasm was considerable. The organisation sought to demonstrate that environmental sustainability was not an abstract ideal but something that could be achieved through practical decisions made in homes and neighbourhoods: reducing waste, conserving energy and water, making more sustainable purchasing choices and supporting one another in adopting new habits. These early initiatives introduced Irish communities to an approach that emphasised participation rather than instruction and cooperation rather than individual responsibility.

Although small in scale, this first phase established several characteristics that would continue to define GAP Ireland in later years:

- It demonstrated the value of working directly with communities rather than speaking to them from a distance.
- It showed that environmental action could be rooted in everyday experience rather than specialist knowledge.
- Perhaps most importantly, it established relationships with people and organisations who believed that environmental sustainability should be accessible to everyone, regardless of background or circumstance.

Yet these promising beginnings proved difficult to sustain.

Like many voluntary organisations of the period, Global Action Plan Ireland faced persistent funding challenges. Despite the commitment of those involved and the promise shown by its programmes, the organisation struggled to secure the financial stability needed to develop further.

In 1999, after only four years of operation, the voluntary organisation ceased its activities.

For many organisations, this might have marked the end of the story. Instead, it became an unexpected turning point.

The closure of the original organisation is an important chapter in GAP Ireland's history because it reveals something fundamental about its development. The organisation that exists today did not emerge through uninterrupted institutional growth. Rather, it survived an early setback before finding renewed purpose through a different set of relationships, a new community and an opportunity that would fundamentally reshape its future.

That opportunity arose through another international connection. Around 2000, **Marilyn Mehlman** of Global Action Plan International met **Ciarán Murray**, Managing Director of **Ballymun Regeneration Limited (BRL)**, at an international conference in Delft. Murray was leading what was one of the most ambitious urban regeneration programmes ever undertaken in Ireland and was looking for new ways to ensure that regeneration was about more than replacing buildings. His vision was that the people of Ballymun would remain at the heart of the community's future: existing residents would continue to live in Ballymun after the regeneration, new families would be welcomed, and local people would play an active role in shaping the redevelopment of their neighbourhood.

This commitment to participation extended well beyond housing. Residents were involved in decisions about new public spaces, community facilities and local priorities, while environmental sustainability was recognised as an integral part of creating a thriving community. Ciarán Murray's vision included innovative ideas such as an attractive community recycling centre, alongside wider initiatives that would encourage local people to take ownership of their environment.

GAP's participatory approach resonated strongly with these ambitions. Following their meeting in Delft, Murray invited GAP to help realise this vision in Ballymun. Marilyn Mehlman brought together **Eric Forsmark**, who had extensive experience of community-based environmental programmes in Sweden, with **Audrey Dickson**, whose earlier work had established Global Action Plan in Ireland. Together they began working with BRL on environmental engagement and community participation.

When **GAP Ballymun** was established, its early work reflected the practical realities of a community undergoing profound change. Alongside supporting environmental initiatives such as EcoTeams and recycling projects, GAP helped facilitate community workshops, resident-led working groups and local projects that enabled people to influence the regeneration of their own neighbourhood. Environmental action became part of a much broader process of community participation, empowering residents to shape not only how they lived more sustainably but also the future of Ballymun itself.

The experience proved transformative for the organisation. Working within Ballymun's regeneration programme demonstrated that environmental sustainability could not be separated from questions of participation, inclusion and local ownership. These lessons would shape GAP Ireland's development for the next quarter of a century and remain central to its work today.

Ballymun: A new beginning (2000–2009)

On 20 August 2001, Global Action Plan Company Limited by Guarantee was formally incorporated, providing the governance and organisational foundations that would enable the organisation to grow over the decades that followed.

Working alongside residents, schools and local community groups, GAP began delivering environmental education and practical sustainability initiatives that reflected the everyday realities of people's lives. Environmental action was not presented as something separate from concerns about neighbourhoods, families or wellbeing. Instead, it became part of a wider conversation about improving places, strengthening communities and creating opportunities for people to participate in shaping their environment.

This represented a very different way of thinking about environmental sustainability. Encouraged and supported by Ballymun Regeneration Limited's commitment to participation and community empowerment, GAP was able to experiment with innovative approaches such as participatory budgeting, adapting them so that everyone could take part regardless of literacy or numeracy levels. Instead of treating local people as recipients of environmental messages, GAP worked with communities to understand the challenges they faced, recognise their existing strengths and develop practical solutions together.

> **GAP Ireland made environmental action something that people did with one another rather than something they were encouraged to do alone.**

Dublin City Council became the principal public funder through the **Ballymun Social Regeneration Fund**, which continues to support GAP's programmes in Ballymun today. With DCC's support, GAP was able to develop a range of programmes to support the community in the town.

Community gardening became one of the clearest expressions of this approach. Gardens provided opportunities to improve local biodiversity and neighbourhood environments, but they also created spaces where people met, learned new skills, shared knowledge and developed relationships. Growing food together became about much more than food production. It strengthened confidence, fostered pride in place and demonstrated that environmental projects could simultaneously generate social, educational and health benefits.

A contemporary example illustrates this philosophy in practice. In 2004, an initiative supported by Ballymun Regeneration Limited brought together small "**garden action teams**" of neighbouring households, who met over an eight-week period to develop gardening skills with the guidance of designer **Bernie Kinsella**. Participants learned about soils, planting, composting and wildlife gardening while working within their own neighbourhoods. It was a simple initiative, yet one that captured the essence of GAP's emerging approach: practical learning, shared experience and environmental improvement rooted in local participation.

One of the most innovative initiatives to emerge during this period was the **Shangan Neighbourhood Recycling and Composting Centre**, established in 2001–02 in partnership with Dublin City Council and Ballymun Regeneration Ltd. Located in the basement of a residential block on Shangan Road, the pilot centre gave residents access to local facilities for recycling paper, cardboard, glass, cans, plastics, batteries and organic waste, at a time when neighbourhood recycling infrastructure was still in its infancy in Ireland.

The project also tested several different composting systems, including the introduction of a Swedish JORA neighbourhood composting machine capable of processing organic waste from up to 100 households. Alongside the facilities themselves, residents were involved in developing practical household storage solutions, monitoring recycling rates and refining the operation of the centre through regular consultation and feedback.

The centre also became a hub for environmental education. A youth initiative known as the **Bounty Hunters** encouraged local children to collect recyclable materials in exchange for "Eco Euros", a local rewards scheme that could be exchanged for environmentally friendly goods and

activities. Within its first months, around 50 children had collected more than 17,000 recyclable items, while training on construction safety and drug awareness was incorporated into the programme to respond to local circumstances. Although not every aspect of the pilot proved successful, the project generated valuable practical experience in neighbourhood recycling, composting and community waste management, informing subsequent work in Ballymun and beyond.

Another example of GAP-inspired community-led action was the campaign that resulted in Ballymun being recognised as a **Fairtrade Town** in 2006. The initiative was led by GAP Ireland in partnership with Ballymun Regeneration Ltd. and the **Ballymun Fairtrade Steering Committee**, bringing together local groups, residents and schools to promote awareness of Fairtrade principles. The campaign used a range of creative engagement activities, including Fairtrade coffee mornings, documentary screenings, banana-eating contests, football games and school bunting competitions, to encourage participation and connect Fairtrade with everyday community life. The campaign's sustained outreach and public events demonstrated strong local commitment and helped secure Ballymun's recognition as a Fairtrade Town.

One of the most enduring expressions of GAP's emerging approach was the **Great Ballymun Ecobook**, which combined practical advice on sustainable living with the stories, history and environmental knowledge of local residents. More than an environmental handbook, it celebrated Ballymun itself, demonstrating GAP's growing conviction that environmental action is strongest when it builds on community identity, local knowledge and pride of place.

In this period GAP also made its first contacts with **Irish Aid**, which funded the EcoTeams programme run by Action For The City, with support from GAP International. In this context, GAP's Great Ballymun Ecobook was translated into Vietnamese, and contact was made with future GAP International member organisation C&E Vietnam.

GAP also played a supporting role in the creation of **The Rediscovery Centre**, which emerged in 2004 out of a pilot paint recycling project supported by Ballymun Regeneration Ltd, and originally envisaged by Ciarán Murray, in conversations with Mehlman, Forsmark and Dickson. The centre grew from public consultation and community engagement in Ballymun which identified opportunities to reuse waste, create local training and build a more sustainable circular-economy model.

> **As GAP's work developed, Ballymun became far more than the location of its earliest programmes. It became the place where GAP Ireland refined its understanding of what sustainability really meant in practice.**

The experience challenged assumptions that environmental issues could be addressed independently of wider social circumstances. It became increasingly clear that people who faced economic, social or practical barriers could not simply be expected to adopt more sustainable lifestyles without support. Equally, communities that developed stronger social connections often became more willing and able to improve their local environments.

The relationship worked in both directions. Environmental projects strengthened communities, and stronger communities became better placed to care for their environment. This insight would become one of the defining characteristics of GAP Ireland's work.

There are several lessons that emerged from GAP's experience in Ballymun during this period:

- First, **environmental sustainability and social inclusion could not be separated.** Successful environmental action depended upon recognising people's lived circumstances and ensuring that everyone had genuine opportunities to participate.

- Second, **pride of place mattered**. People were far more likely to care for their environment when they felt connected to it and when improvements reflected their own aspirations for their neighbourhoods.

- Third, **participation proved more effective than instruction**. Lasting change emerged not from telling people what they should do, but from creating opportunities for people to learn together, share experience and discover solutions collectively.

- Fourth, **community initiatives generated benefits that extended well beyond environmental outcomes**. Projects such as community gardening strengthened biodiversity while also building relationships, improving wellbeing and increasing community confidence.

- Finally, the organisation learned that **trust was one of the most important foundations for environmental action**. Behaviour change was sustained not because people had received more information, but because they felt supported, respected and part of something larger than themselves.



GAP stall at the Ballymun Harvest Market, 2007



Participants in the Green Living Programme, 2009

These were not abstract principles developed in strategy documents. They were practical lessons learned through years of working with communities during one of Ireland's most significant regeneration programmes.

> **Over time, these lessons became woven into the organisation's identity. They shaped the programmes GAP developed, the partnerships it pursued and the way it understood its role within Ireland's environmental movement. Although future initiatives would address new challenges, from biodiversity loss and climate change to global citizenship and nature connection, they would continue to reflect ideas first tested and refined in Ballymun.**

The importance of this period, when **Ian Callanan** was GAP Manager, was recognised formally in 2009, when Global Action Plan amended its Memorandum of Association to extend its remit beyond Ballymun to encompass the whole of Ireland.

The amendment marked more than an administrative change. It acknowledged that the approach developed through the Ballymun experience had relevance far beyond a single community. What had begun as a local partnership during a regeneration project had evolved into a model capable of

supporting environmental action in communities across the country. Ballymun was not simply where Global Action Plan Ireland began. It was where the organisation discovered its distinctive identity.

The values that continue to guide GAP today - participation, inclusion, practical action, partnership and environmental justice - were not adopted in theory before being applied in practice. They emerged from practice itself, shaped by listening to communities, responding to local experience and recognising that environmental sustainability is strongest when it grows alongside stronger, more connected communities.

As the organisation expanded beyond Ballymun in the years that followed, it carried these lessons with it. The place that had given GAP Ireland a new beginning had also given it a lasting sense of purpose.



Site of the future GLAS community garden in Ballymun, 2008



Eoin Craven in the GLAS community garden in Ballymun, 2012

Becoming a national organisation (2009–2016)

The amendment of Global Action Plan Ireland's Memorandum of Association in 2009 marked the end of one chapter in the organisation's history and the beginning of another. Since its establishment, GAP had been closely identified with Ballymun and the regeneration of one community. The decision to extend the organisation's remit formally to encompass the whole of Ireland recognised that the lessons learned there had a wider significance. What had proved effective in one place could now inform work with communities, schools, organisations and public bodies across the country.

The transition from a locally focused organisation to one with a national remit did not involve abandoning the principles that had shaped GAP's early work. On the contrary, expansion was built upon the conviction that environmental action is most effective when it is rooted in local participation, practical experience and collaboration. The challenge was to translate those principles into programmes capable of responding to the needs of diverse communities throughout Ireland.

> **During this period, GAP Ireland steadily broadened both its geographical reach and the range of people with whom it worked.**

While households and community groups remained central to its mission, the organisation increasingly developed partnerships with schools. Building on the foundations of the original Green Living Programme, GAP expanded its work into environmental education, community gardening and learning initiatives designed for people at different stages of life. Rather than developing programmes in isolation, the organisation sought to create opportunities through which individuals and organisations could explore environmental challenges together and identify practical responses suited to their own circumstances.

Community gardening became an increasingly important part of this work. Initiated by the Ballymun Gardening Club led by **Maura Hurley**, GAP established the **Muck & Magic community garden** and, some months later, the **Virgin Mary community garden**.

The Muck & Magic garden soon developed along a fully volunteer-driven model, whereas the Virgin Mary garden, later led by GAP staff member **Eoin Craven**, became more focused on demonstrating how organic fruit and vegetables could be grown in an urban environment.

The site of the Virgin Mary community garden had previously been a neglected open space that was little used by either the local community or the local authority, and had become associated with antisocial behaviour. By transforming the area into a productive garden, local residents reclaimed it as an attractive, well-used community space.

Over time, the Virgin Mary garden evolved beyond food production. As people came together to plant, grow and maintain the spaces, they also became places for learning, volunteering and building relationships. The local schools in Ballymun attended sessions in the garden in growing numbers, and the regular volunteers worked to strengthen biodiversity, learn about healthier lifestyles, and developed a growing sense of pride of place. In this way, the garden demonstrated that environmental projects can generate wider social benefits; not because that was their original purpose, but because communities themselves shaped them into welcoming shared spaces that support both environmental and community wellbeing.



Virgin Mary community garden, Ballymun, 2012



Maura Hurley with volunteers in the Virgin Mary community garden, Ballymun, 2013

At the same time, environmental education became an increasingly significant strand of the organisation's work. Schools offered opportunities to engage young people at an early stage in developing an understanding of sustainability, while also encouraging practical action within families and communities. Rather than presenting environmental issues as distant or overwhelming, GAP's educational programmes sought to connect learning with experience, enabling children and young people to discover how their own actions could contribute to positive change.

These developments reflected an important evolution in the organisation's thinking. The early years of GAP had focused primarily on helping households reduce their environmental impact through practical changes in daily life. That work remained important, but experience had shown that lasting change was strengthened when individuals were supported within wider communities and institutions. Schools and neighbourhood organisations became places where environmental awareness could be translated into collective action. International partnerships also assumed greater importance during this period.

Vanessa Moore, who became Chief Executive Officer in 2010 after joining GAP in 2007, oversaw this period of programme development and strengthened the organisation's role within both Ireland and

the wider GAP International network. New partnerships, European collaborations and the use of student-made videos helped to broaden GAP's reach.

Responding to new environmental challenges (2016–2021)

By the middle of the 2010s, the environmental landscape was changing rapidly. Climate change, once regarded largely as a future challenge, was becoming a reality. Biodiversity loss was increasingly recognised as a crisis in its own right. Public understanding of sustainability was expanding beyond questions of waste and energy conservation to include food systems, ecosystems, mental wellbeing, social justice and global interdependence.

For GAP Ireland, these developments did not require a change of direction so much as an expansion of perspective.

> **The organisation's founding belief that lasting environmental change begins with people and communities remained unchanged. What evolved was the range of issues through which that belief found expression.**

During this period, GAP broadened its programme portfolio to address the increasingly interconnected nature of environmental challenges. While practical action remained central, new initiatives encouraged participants to explore not only how they lived, but also how they related to nature, to one another and to communities beyond Ireland.

In 2017, GAP commissioned a **Social Return on Investment analysis** to assess the wider value created through its work in Ballymun. The study examined the environmental, social and economic impacts experienced by participants, partner organisations and communities. It found evidence of improvements in areas including environmental behaviours, confidence, employability, community participation and wellbeing, reinforcing what the organisation had long observed through its programmes: that engaging people in environmental action delivers benefits extending well beyond sustainability alone. The study also marked an important stage in GAP's evolution, demonstrating a growing commitment to evidence-based practice and rigorous evaluation of its impact.

Research was also informing GAP's work on **nature connection**. Academic insights were increasingly demonstrating that direct experiences of the natural world contribute not only to environmental awareness but also to health, wellbeing and long-term stewardship of the environment. Under the leadership of its new CEO **Eufemia Solinas**, GAP responded by developing programmes that encouraged children and young people to experience nature as something to be explored, understood and cared for rather than simply studied.

GAP's **Nature Explorer for Schools** programme (first called **Park Stewardship)** reflected this approach. Rather than treating environmental education as the transfer of information, it enabled participants to learn through observation, curiosity and direct engagement with local natural environments. By promoting a sense of wonder as well as understanding, these initiatives helped cultivate the habits of care upon which environmental responsibility depends.

At community level, gardening continued to play an important role in the organisation's work. Projects such as the Muck & Magic community garden, and the Virgin Mary's community garden, that would later develop into the **GLAS community gardens programme,** demonstrated how shared growing spaces could contribute simultaneously to biodiversity, food awareness, social inclusion and individual wellbeing.



Action on Global Goals teacher training, 2018


Let's Talk Science, 2018

Under the guidance of **Sharon Harvey**, after 2014 the GLAS community garden became a place where environmental action was visible and collaborative, and the community garden became a centre for social inclusion, in addition to environmental education. The GLAS garden evolved into a place where neighbours can meet, and people can grow confidence and a sense of belonging.

GAP's partnership with **Young Ballymun** through the **Nature Explorer programme** illustrates this important evolution in the organisation's work. The project is based on a recognition that many urban families have limited access to green spaces, and that children therefore often miss out on a chance to build a lifelong relationship with nature. The programme, supported by Dublin City Council since 2019, continues to be one of GAP's flagship programmes combining social inclusion, social justice and nature connection.

Education also became increasingly international in outlook. Through its **ACT Global Citizenship** programme and participation in Erasmus+ initiatives, GAP encouraged learners to explore the connections between environmental sustainability, climate change, inequality and global justice. These programmes reflected an understanding that local actions are shaped by global systems and that environmental responsibility includes recognising Ireland's place within an interconnected world.


Park Stewardship session during Covid, 2020


Action on Global Goals session with Sphere17, 2018

The organisation's growing involvement in European partnerships reinforced this perspective. Working alongside organisations in other countries allowed GAP to exchange ideas, contribute to international learning and adapt successful approaches to Irish contexts. The international relationships that had

first brought Global Action Plan to Ireland continued to enrich its work, reminding the organisation that environmental challenges rarely respect national boundaries.

Water conservation, biodiversity and sustainable resource management also became more prominent within the organisation's educational programmes, including in the highly successful nationwide **Water Explorers** programme. This initiative reflected the growing recognition that environmental issues are deeply interconnected. Understanding water, biodiversity, climate and consumption as part of a single ecological system encouraged participants to see sustainability not as a series of separate issues but as an integrated way of thinking about the relationship between people and the natural world.



National Water Explorer winners Berrings NS, 2016


Launch of Water Explorers 2016, with Duncan Stewart

Yet perhaps the most significant development during these years was not the introduction of new programmes, but the gradual broadening of the organisation's understanding of environmental citizenship. Earlier work had understandably concentrated on helping people reduce their environmental impact through practical changes in everyday life.

> **By the beginning of the 2020s, GAP was increasingly encouraging people to see themselves not as consumers making individual choices but as citizens contributing to wider social and environmental change.**

This shift reflected wider developments in environmental thinking. Questions of biodiversity, climate justice and sustainability were increasingly understood as inseparable from issues of equality, participation and community resilience. GAP's work evolved accordingly, creating opportunities for people to learn together, engage with complexity and participate constructively in addressing shared challenges.

Successive strategic plans reflected an evolving understanding of sustainability itself. Earlier frameworks had focused primarily on supporting more sustainable lifestyles and reducing the environmental impact of everyday living. By the early 2020s, this had broadened into an explicit recognition of the interconnected biodiversity and environmental crises facing society, alongside a stronger emphasis on community, inclusion and collective responsibility. The evolution was one of emphasis rather than philosophy, building on long-established values while responding to an increasingly urgent environmental context.

When new leadership emerged in 2021, it inherited an organisation that had grown considerably in experience and ambition. The challenge for the next chapter would not be to redefine GAP's purpose, but to respond to an increasingly urgent environmental reality in a way that respected the participatory ethos that had guided GAP Ireland for so long.

A national voice for sustainability based on participation (2021–2026)

When GAP Ireland marked its twentieth anniversary as an incorporated organisation in 2021, it did so against a backdrop of profound environmental and social change. Climate change had moved from scientific prediction to lived experience. Biodiversity loss had become recognised as an interconnected crisis demanding urgent action. The COVID-19 pandemic had reminded societies of both their vulnerabilities and their capacity for collective action. All over Ireland, sustainability was increasingly understood not as a specialist environmental concern but as a question touching every aspect of society, from education and public health to business, community development and economic resilience.

For GAP Ireland, these developments represented a defining moment. For more than three decades the organisation had championed the notion that lasting environmental change depends upon people's willingness and ability to participate in creating it. As the national conversation around sustainability evolved, this idea became increasingly relevant.

The appointment of **Hans Zomer** as Chief Executive brought a new strategic and public dimension to this phase of GAP's development. His experience in international development and human rights reinforced GAP's view that sustainability cannot be separated from social justice, participation and the ability of people and communities to shape change. Building on GAP's longstanding participatory ethos, he helped renew and extend this approach in response to the climate and biodiversity crises, strengthening the organisation's focus on behaviour change, empowerment, climate justice and community resilience. Under his leadership, GAP experienced a period of rapid growth in reach, partnerships, income and staffing levels.

This period saw the organisation deepen and broaden its work across several interconnected themes:

- Programmes promoting **nature connection** continued to encourage children, families and communities to experience the natural world directly, recognising that lasting care for nature begins with meaningful encounters with it.

- **Community initiatives** demonstrated how biodiversity, food growing and neighbourhood participation could strengthen both local environments and community wellbeing.

- **Global citizenship education** helped learners understand the links between environmental sustainability, inequality and international development, encouraging participants to recognise both local responsibilities and global connections.

- The creation of **a second GLAS community garden**, in partnership with **TU Dublin** and **Fingal County Council**, marked an important milestone in the organisation's development. It demonstrated that the community gardening model first established in Ballymun could be successfully adapted to new communities. The GLAS @ TU Dublin garden has become a place where students, local residents, volunteers and community groups come together to grow food, support biodiversity, learn practical sustainability skills and strengthen community connections. For GAP, it represented both a continuation of its roots in community gardening and a significant step towards establishing this approach as a core element of its national programme of work.

- Alongside these established areas of work, GAP also developed a significant new strand of activity through its **growing engagement with businesses**.

Recognising that workplaces represent one of the most influential settings for societal change, the organisation developed programmes designed to engage employees in sustainability through participation rather than prescription. Working with businesses across Ireland, GAP supported organisations in creating opportunities for staff to explore environmental challenges together, identify practical responses and embed sustainability within workplace culture.

Innovative new projects, including GAP's **digital climate challenges** and its corporate team building programme through volunteering in the GLAS gardens, helped the organisation build partnerships with companies big and small.

Although this represented a new audience, it reflected a familiar philosophy. From the Household EcoTeams of the early 1990s to residents' groups in Ballymun, from schools and community gardens to employee engagement programmes, the organisation had consistently applied the same approach. Sustainable change is most likely to endure when people are given opportunities to learn together, participate actively and discover their own capacity to make a difference.

> **One of the most significant developments during these years was the organisation's growing emphasis on hope as an essential component of environmental engagement.**

As awareness of climate change and biodiversity loss increased, so too did feelings of anxiety, grief and helplessness, particularly among younger generations. GAP recognised that environmental education could not simply communicate scientific evidence. It also needed to create spaces where people could acknowledge difficult emotions, build supportive relationships and discover constructive ways of responding.

Programmes such as **Active Hope**, drawing upon *The Work That Reconnects*, reflected this understanding. Rather than presenting hope as passive optimism, GAP encouraged participants to recognise hope as something created through action, connection and shared purpose.

This period also saw growing recognition, both in public policy and in educational practice, of the importance of experiential learning and meaningful engagement with nature.

- The principles underpinning **Forest School and outdoor learning** approaches, encouraging children and young people to learn through regular, direct experiences in natural environments, became increasingly reflected in curriculum development and educational policy.

- Community gardens gained wider recognition as valuable spaces for environmental education, biodiversity enhancement, food growing, health and wellbeing, and community participation. This growing recognition was reflected not only in expanding local initiatives but also in national policy, with legislation requiring every local authority in Ireland to prepare and maintain a policy on the development and support of community gardens.

These developments acknowledged the increasingly important role that community gardens play in climate action and social policy. They also echoed approaches that GAP had long championed through its own work, reinforcing the organisation's conviction that environmental understanding is strengthened when people experience nature directly and participate actively in caring for the places where they live, learn and work.

Annual reports from the period record significant increases in income, staffing, programme delivery and participant numbers, reflecting both increasing demand for meaningful environmental engagement and growing confidence among funders and partners in GAP Ireland's approach.

As the organisation expanded its activities across communities, schools, businesses and the public sector, it continued to strengthen its governance, deepen strategic partnerships and invest in organisational capacity.

This growth represented more than an increase in scale. It marked GAP's emergence as one of Ireland's leading organisations specialising in public engagement for sustainability. Increasingly, local authorities, educational institutions, businesses, community organisations and public bodies looked to GAP not simply as a provider of environmental education but as a trusted partner capable of helping people translate environmental concern into meaningful action.

Many organisations have made invaluable contributions through scientific research, policy development, advocacy or habitat conservation. GAP occupies a different, but complementary, place within Ireland's environmental movement. GAP's expertise lies in engaging people.

In working with children, resident groups, teachers, employees, students and community organisations, GAP creates opportunities for participation that enable environmental responsibility to become part of everyday life.

As Ireland's response to climate change and biodiversity loss became increasingly ambitious, the importance of public participation also became more widely recognised. National policies, technological innovation and investment all play essential roles in supporting the transition to a more sustainable society. Equally important, however, is the willingness and capacity of people to engage with that transition in their homes, schools, workplaces and communities. This was precisely the space that GAP Ireland had come to occupy.

Legacy

The history of GAP Ireland is about more than the growth of a single organisation. It reflects the evolution of environmental thinking in Ireland and demonstrates how one organisation has consistently responded to changing challenges while remaining true to a clear and enduring purpose.

That purpose has never been simply to encourage more environmentally responsible behaviour. Rather, it has been to enable people to participate in creating a more sustainable society.

Over time, the issues facing society have changed. Early concerns with waste, energy and sustainable living have expanded to encompass climate change, biodiversity loss, nature connection, wellbeing, global citizenship and environmental justice. Increasingly, it has also become clear that environmental sustainability cannot be separated from questions of social justice, equity and inclusion. The transition to a low-carbon society must also be a **just transition**; one that enables everyone to participate in, and benefit from, environmental change.

Throughout these developments, GAP has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to evolve without losing sight of its core philosophy. Whether working with communities, schools, young people, public bodies or businesses, the organisation has consistently focused on creating opportunities for people to

learn together, act together and build confidence through participation. This participatory approach is perhaps GAP's most distinctive contribution.

> **Many organisations have advanced sustainability through research, advocacy, policy development or conservation. GAP has complemented those efforts by focusing on the human dimension of change.**

GAP's work recognises that ambitious policies, scientific knowledge and technological innovation are all essential, but that lasting progress also depends on people's ability to understand change, contribute to it and see themselves as part of the solution.

In recent years, this understanding has broadened further through the organisation's work on **global citizenship** and just transition. These programmes recognise that environmental challenges are inseparable from wider questions of human rights, inequality and global responsibility. They encourage people to see themselves not only as consumers, but as citizens and members of an interconnected world, whose choices and actions have consequences far beyond their immediate communities.

This perspective has become increasingly important as Ireland responds to the climate and biodiversity crises. Building a sustainable future is not simply a technical or economic challenge. It is also a social and democratic one. It requires people from all backgrounds to participate in shaping the transition, ensuring that environmental action strengthens communities, reduces inequality and creates opportunities rather than leaving people behind.

Throughout its history, GAP has shown that participation is not an end in itself. It is the means through which environmental knowledge becomes confidence, confidence becomes action, and action becomes lasting change. That may prove to be the organisation's most enduring legacy.

The environmental challenges facing future generations will undoubtedly differ from those that shaped GAP's early years, just as today's challenges differ from those of the 1990s. New technologies will emerge, public policy will continue to evolve and society's understanding of sustainability will deepen further. Yet the history of Global Action Plan Ireland suggests that one principle is likely to remain constant: environmental progress is strongest when people are empowered to participate in creating it.

In that sense, GAP's greatest contribution has not been a particular programme or project, but the demonstration that participation, inclusion and shared responsibility are themselves essential foundations of a more sustainable, more just and more resilient society.

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