

Y Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, Amgylchedd a Materion Gwledig | Climate Change,
Environment and Rural Affairs Committee
Ymchwiliad Rhandiroedd | Allotments Inquiry
Ymateb gan : Sefydliad Ymchwil Mannau Cynaliadwy – Prifysgol Caerdydd
Evidence from : Sustainable Places Research Institute – Cardiff Universityl

Introduction

The [Sustainable Places Research Institute](#) is a meeting place for sustainability science, focussed on exploring innovative solutions for a more sustainable future. The Institute operates across disciplines in all three Colleges of Cardiff University. Bringing together over 100 researchers, we work to find solutions to real problems, in the real world. Working with stakeholders, including local community groups, public authorities and academic partners, we support methodological innovation for research into sustainable place making.

Our submission draws on research delivered and in progress, and researchers' ongoing interactions with practitioners. In line with the remit of the 2010 inquiry we consider allotments and community gardening, with the majority of our research focused on the latter.

Benefits of allotments and community gardens

As noted in the report of the 2010 committee inquiry, the benefits of allotments and community gardens are wide-ranging. They have potential to support multiple outcomes contributing to Wales' goals under the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, with the advantage of simultaneously achieving multi-faceted benefits. An extensive body of research now provides evidence of these benefits and how they are achieved. Findings from Cardiff University-led research and involvement with local projects demonstrate that:

- Residents of both urban and rural areas in Wales access therapeutic experiences through involvement in communal gardening which are reported to particularly enhance mental wellbeing.¹
- Participation in community gardening provides opportunities for place-making which can foster positive relationships and sense of community.²
- Young people's participation in school gardening has personal and educational benefits, particularly when delivered as part of a 'whole school approach' to food, with growing linked to the curriculum.³

¹ Pitt, H. 2014. Therapeutic experiences of community gardens: putting flow in its place. *Health & Place* 27 , pp. 84-91. [10.1016/j.healthplace.2014.02.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2014.02.006)

² Pitt, H. 2019 Limits to growth: Why gardening has limited success growing inclusive communities, in *Urban gardening and the struggle for social and spatial justice*, C. Certoma (Ed.) Manchester Uni. Press

³ Pitt, H., Jones, M. and Weitkamp, E. 2018. Every city a food growing city? What food growing schools London reveals about city strategies for food system sustainability. *Sustainability* 10 (8) , 2924. [10.3390/su10082924](https://doi.org/10.3390/su10082924)

- Socially, allotments and community gardens provide a rich community resource, including acting as non-institutional referral agencies. They act as networks or hubs, linking together organisations and institutions including mental health organisations, community development schemes, food banks, government social work programmes.⁴
- They often offer non-judgemental, welcoming spaces of participation, inclusion and empowerment, an important vehicle for reaching out to the most vulnerable citizens offering intangible benefits such as a sense of ownership, freedom, and learning new skills.⁴
- Though the immediate impact of food consumed through community gardening and allotments are often minimal, they can be spaces where people begin learning about and respecting food. In this case, it often resulted in more awareness of unhealthy consumption and desire to eat healthier foods. In relation to food poverty, community gardening and allotments can go beyond the individualisation effects of food banks, to empower citizens to recognise the deep structures of the issue.⁴
- Communal gardens can provide a valuable resource for those seeking sanctuary within Wales, for example refugees and asylum seekers.⁵

Despite the body of research available, there remain gaps in understanding and evidence of the benefits of allotments and community gardening. Those which may be of interest to this committee include:

- Lack of longitudinal perspectives which demonstrate long-term benefits and involvement.
- Limited understanding of whether positive experiences extend beyond participation, to impact other dimensions of gardeners' lives.
- Lack of robust measurement of ecological and environmental benefits.

We would also highlight that the social and wellbeing benefits of community gardening are complex, and never guaranteed.⁶ The contribution allotments and community gardens can make to Wales' ability to feed itself sustainably is likely to remain marginal, particularly without transformative action on entrenched problems with the current food system.

Challenges facing allotments and community gardens

Projects and groups still encounter issues which limit their potential to achieve such wide-ranging benefits. Those apparent from our research and practical engagements include:

⁴ Sonnino, R. and Hanmer, O. 2016. Beyond food provision: Understanding community growing in the context of food poverty. *Geoforum* 74, pp. 213-221

⁵ <https://www.globalgardensproject.co.uk>

⁶ Maughan, C., Laycock Pedersen, R. and Pitt, H. 2018. The problems, promise and pragmatism of community food growing. *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* 33 (SI6), pp. 497-502. [10.1017/S1742170518000200](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742170518000200)

- The broad range of skills required to run community gardens, and potential to underestimate the importance of abilities to manage them in a manner which ensures they are inclusive.
- Reliance on short-term project funding, with particular difficulties attracting funds beyond the set-up or capital outlay phase.
- Capacity of local authorities to support community groups and provide a straight forward process for taking over municipal sites or plots.
- Difficulty embedding food growing in secondary level education.
- Limits to long-term access and security of tenure of community growing sites and allotments.⁷

The Welsh Government's strategic approach

The approach Welsh Government took to supporting allotments and community gardens around the time of the previous inquiry could be regarded as innovative and sector leading. The *Community Grown Food Action Plan* and associated Task and Finish Group, and allied *Horticulture Action Plan* supported comprehensive action. This provided strategic leadership, situated within the broader context of an over-arching vision for food sustainability. The crucial need for such leadership has been reinforced by recent research highlighting the urgency of transforming diets and food production to achieve a healthy diet from a sustainable food system.⁸ Commissioning comprehensive research of allotments and community gardening in Wales generated data and insight lacking in other parts of the UK.⁹

It is not clear that this momentum has been sustained, or that Welsh Government has continued to dedicate support for community growing. We are unaware that the outcomes of the key action plans have been reported or evaluated, without which their impacts are uncertain. Valuable ongoing initiatives are being supported via Rural Development Programme investment, but such support is not guaranteed under post-CAP regimes. Policy decisions beyond the immediate field of allotments and community gardens have also had negative impacts for Wales capacity to support community growing initiatives. In particular, we note the demise of Communities First resulting in the closure of gardening initiatives formerly hosted and/or funded by the programme's delivery bodies. We further note the challenge facing ongoing community growing projects in this current economic climate, making it difficult to meet costs such as allotment fees.

⁷ Nicol, P. 2016. *Placing the apple: exploring the urban applescape*. PhD Thesis, Cardiff University

⁸ Willett, W. et al. 2019 *Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems* [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)31788-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31788-4/fulltext)

⁹ Wales Rural Observatory 2012 *Community Grown Food in Wales* <http://www.walesruralobservatory.org.uk/sites/default/files/Executive%20Summary%20FINAL.pdf>

Opportunities

We have identified further opportunities to capitalise on the benefits of community involvement in food growing which were not recommended by the previous inquiry, or have since emerged as necessary. These are positioned within the need for a comprehensive national vision and strategy for food, integrating goals for environmental and human health:

- Review the current state of community food growing in Wales by updating the 2012 data, using this process to identify ongoing challenges and opportunities. This would provide a longitudinal picture of the sector, and highlight the extent to which activity has survived over the last decade.
- Identify funding mechanisms to extend third-sector led capacity building and support such as Tyfu Fyny, currently supported by RDP investment.
- Recognise the value of community gardening as an entry point and companion to commercial food production. Anecdotal reports suggest that involvement in community projects and volunteering facilitates movement into farming and food production careers, countering long-standing problems of attracting entrants to the sector.
- Community growing has commercial dimensions, contributing to local food chains, and acting as a spring-board for establishing new horticultural businesses. This potential deserves support and exploration to support the Government's ambition to expanding the horticultural sector in Wales.

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