



Comment on

**Community gardens in the ACT: draft site
selection criteria for future locations**

Discussion paper

August 2012

About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges that Canberra has been built on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal people. We pay our respects to their elders and recognise the displacement and disadvantage they have suffered as a result of European settlement. We celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contribution to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) is the peak representative body for not-for-profit community organisations, people living with disadvantage and low-income citizens of the Territory.

ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS' vision is to live in a fair and equitable community that respects and values diversity and actively encourages collaborations that promote justice, equity and social inclusion.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS receives funding from the ACT Government - Community Services Directorate.

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Introduction

ACTCOSS welcomes the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper for *the Community gardens in the ACT: draft site selection criteria for future locations* (the 'Discussion Paper'). The benefits of community gardens reach beyond the individual by promoting connectedness and social inclusion, can also assist to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for community members. ACTCOSS supports many of the draft site selection criteria as set out in the Discussion Paper; this comment seeks to focus on those pertaining to social inclusion and broader community wellbeing.

Poverty

Community gardens are a positive way to reduce some of the detrimental effects of poverty, such as access to affordable and healthy foods. By participating in community gardens, Canberrans not only learn skills on how to grow their own food, but also have access to nutritious foods they may not otherwise be able to purchase. Food production is a proactive way to alleviate some of the health detriments of poverty for people living in the ACT, as well as promote healthy behaviours and the development of valuable skills.

Social Determinants of Health

Social inclusion and connectedness

Access to community gardens can increase social inclusion through providing opportunities for individuals to engage with their community. It is important people's recreational needs are met as this increases a sense of belonging, connectedness and social enrichment. Community gardens, like local libraries, schools, shops and community centres, can act as a space for people to meet and pursue activities which provide a sense of connectedness and wellbeing.

Although traditionally people living in the ACT have a high participation rate in sports and recreational activities (88.6 percent in 2008) and cultural events (89.8 percent in 2006),¹ there are still a number of people who miss out on access to these events and services. People experiencing disadvantage, in particular those with limited transport options and/or mobility such as older people or people with disabilities, are especially vulnerable to social exclusion; it is vital everyone is given the opportunity to participate in community events.

¹ ACT Government, *Quick Stats 2009-2010*, viewed 30 July 2012, <http://www.cmd.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/154501/canberra-quickstats-2009-10.pdf >.

Physical health

The benefits of physical activity are widely recognised, as are the detriments of being sedentary. ACTCOSS welcomes the installation of more community gardens in the ACT. According to the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Australians: Scientific Background Report* approximately 50% of Australians (39% males and 58% females) are considered insufficiently active.² The same report states that ‘population benefits are likely to come from encouraging even small increases in physical activity levels among the least active’.

Additionally, most Australians do not reach the daily fruit and vegetable intake recommended for good health.³ Learning to harvest one’s own food can provide increased access to seasonal and nutritious foods which may otherwise be overlooked for less expensive, less healthy options.

Mental health

Poor mental health can be closely associated with social exclusion. Participation in society improves mental health and one’s everyday functioning. On a broader social level, it reduces discrimination and stigmatisation, both essential to achieving and maintaining mental health. Social connections include engaging with friends and peers, undertaking education, art, hobbies, other activities, and social relationships.

Mental health consumers must be empowered to participate in community life. The Mental Health Coordinating Council (MHCC) of New South Wales have shown studies consistently demonstrate people living with mental health problems who are provided with well-planned, comprehensive support in the community have a better quality of life, develop an improved level of functioning and social contact, and experience fewer relapses.

By creating a welcoming and inclusive environment, community gardens can serve as a valuable space for community members to engage in recreation and create meaningful relationships, both of which can improve mental health outcomes for participants.

Accessibility

The importance of accessibility to the ACT’s community gardens is paramount. It would be detrimental to the purpose of social inclusion to exclude community members from participating in community garden projects. Therefore ACTCOSS recommends the community groups in charge of the gardens be strongly encouraged to invite the wider community to participate as much as possible.

2 G Egger, R Donovan, B Swinburn, B Giles-Corti, & F Bull, *Physical Activity Guidelines for Australians – Scientific Background Report*, The University of Western Australia and The Centre for Health Promotion and Research Sydney for the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, December 1999.

3 The State of Western Australia, *Go For 2 & 5*, the State of Western Australia and the Department of Health WA, viewed 30 July 2012, <<http://www.gofor2and5.com.au/>>.

A welcoming environment that is well-maintained and inviting could prove to be a beneficial way of engaging local community members. Further, building community gardens in mixed housing settings will assist in promoting social inclusion and connectedness by drawing together a diverse range of members of the community.

Resources for gardening should be able to be stored on-site so community members have access to materials and resources as needed, and are not required to travel elsewhere or invest in their own equipment.

People with disabilities and older people

As mentioned before, people experiencing disadvantage, in particular those with limited transport options and/or mobility such as older people or people with disabilities, are especially vulnerable to social exclusion. Community gardens can provide a safe and healthy location for people to socialise and connect with their local community. Therefore, the location of community gardens should be accessible for all persons, including people with wheelchairs, scooters and walkers. Ramps should be installed in convenient locations and all pathways should be designed with wheelchair and scooter accessibility as a priority. Where possible, community gardens should be located close to accessible bathrooms.

Transport

ACTCOSS welcomes the discussion paper's section on transport, under A.4 Accessibility, where draft site selection criteria includes

- A4.2: Appropriate car parking should be available on-site or within reasonable walking distance; and
- A4.3: Sites should preferably be located close to public transport and public toilets, where possible.⁴

ACTCOSS has done significant advocacy around the need to link social inclusion with sustainable and accessible transport.⁵ Problems with transport provision combined with the location of services can reinforce social exclusion and poor physical, social and mental health. People who do not own a vehicle, live in outer suburbs, work irregular hours or are experiencing disadvantage in other ways can be prevented by inadequate transport from accessing community facilities, including community gardens.

Given there are significant areas in the ACT which have not been marked as including a community garden, including Woden Valley,⁶ it becomes even more important potential sites for community gardens are located close to public transport spots, so everyone may benefit from access to community gardens.

4 ACT Government Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate, *Community gardens in the ACT: draft site selection criteria for future locations' Discussion paper*, ACT Government, June 2012, p. 11.

5 ACTCOSS, *The Path Less Travelled*, ACT, 2009.

6 ACT Government Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate, op. cit., p.4, figure 1.

Children

It is important community gardens in the ACT are accessible for people of all ages, including children and young people. Community gardens should be located in areas where children will be able to partake in and enjoy the activities offered. ACTCOSS notes while the draft discussion paper focuses on accessibility to the gardens in a broader sense, there is no mention of children or young people, and their particular requirements.

Similar to the need for ramps for people in wheelchairs and scooters, there should be ramps for parents with prams so they may access the gardens with young children. In the interest of sun-safety, there should be areas which provide shade during the hottest parts of the day. Although responsibility of the child or young person falls on the adult who has brought them to the garden, any sprays, fertilisers or dangerous tools should be kept in a safe place.

Child Friendly Cities

The Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) was begun in 1996 as a response to the resolution passed during the second UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) where it was declared

the well-being of children is the ultimate indicator of a healthy habitat, a democratic society and good governance.⁷

Child-friendly cities are those committed to fulfilling the rights of children as defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and which ensure these rights are reflected in policies and programs. Rights which could be linked to community gardens include the right to: participate in family, community and social life; meet friends and play; and have green spaces for plants and animals.⁸

In his 2007 speech at the National Museum of Australia on child-friendly cities, Dr Paul Tranter noted

children should have the freedom to playfully and safely explore their environment in ever-increasing circles as they mature without the constant threats of traffic, danger or violence...children should have a sense of connection with their community and their neighbourhood: a sense that they're a valued and important part of their community; and a sense of attachment to the physical aspects of the environment – not only the trees, the rocks and the soil, but also people...If children can have that freedom and that sense of connection, it encourages their development, not just physical development but also social, cognitive and emotional. It gives them a sense of place.⁹

7 United Nations, viewed 2 December 2011, <<http://www.unicef.org.au/Discover/What-We-Do/Child-Friendly-Cities.aspx>>.

8 UNICEF, *Child Friendly Cities promoted by UNICEF National Committees and Country Offices – Fact sheet, September 2009*. Downloaded from <<http://www.childfriendlycities.org/en/overview/what-is-a-child-friendly-city>>.

9 Dr P. Tranter, Recorded 27 October 2007, viewed 25 November 2011, <http://www.nma.gov.au/audio/transcripts/NMA_tranter_20071027.html>.

Community gardens can play a powerful role in shaping the ACT as a child friendly city. In a physical context, they provide children with the opportunity to engage with and explore their natural environment, and the chance to learn about flora, fauna and gardening. Children can also develop new skills and learn about healthy lifestyle choices and nutrition through helping to grow food in the community gardens.

Community gardens also give children the opportunity to connect with their community, and foster a sense of belonging. Through playing an active role in the tending of the gardens, children can develop a sense of responsibility, self confidence and cooperation, all important parts of their social development.¹⁰

People on low incomes

Consultation with community organisations has raised concerns that including people on low incomes in the building of community gardens may be difficult due to some of the guidelines set out in the discussion paper. For example, given the amount of financial support required from those wishing to undertake a community gardens project as set out in *C.16: Financial capacity*, it may be impractical to expect Canberrans on low incomes to ‘demonstrate a sustainable financial capacity’.

Additionally, while many people may have interest in participating, they may not have the social connections to form the group needed to begin a project, as required in *C.15: Sustainable garden membership*. To be truly inclusive, ACTCOSS recommends the government be more proactive about engaging people on lower incomes by offering further financial support and encouraging community groups to partner interested parties and act as a liaison, at least in the beginning stages of the relationships.

Environment

While community gardens provide a whole range of benefits to both individuals and the wider community, it is important they do not replace other forms of public space, such as nature parks or playing fields. ACTCOSS notes this is included in issues for consideration in the discussion paper. ACTCOSS is also pleased to note the discussion paper includes issues for consideration around the protection of sites which may have significance to the Aboriginal community.¹¹

Climate change/sustainability

Community gardens can have a positive effect on the ‘liveability’ of cities, and can aid to negate some of the negative impacts of climate change. Potential garden sites should take a ‘sustainable living’ approach and use recycled

10 State Government of Victoria, *Gardening for Children*, viewed 31 July 2012, <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Gardening_for_children>.

11 ACT Government Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate, op. cit., p. 15.

materials wherever possible to create the garden, and should also work in harmony with the natural surrounding environment.