



All-Party Group on Climate Action: Visit to Belfast City Council's UPSURGE Demonstration Site

Date: Friday 27th June 2025

Time: 11am – 1pm

Location: Friends of the Field, Lower Botanic Gardens, Stranmillis Embankment, BT7 1LP

In Attendance: Danny Donnelly (MLA), Cllr Roisin Lynch (Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council), Cllr Bronagh Magee (Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council), Jacqueline O'Hagan (Belfast Healthy Cities), Zara Hamilton (Ards and North Down Borough Council), Nichola Hughes (Sustainable NI), Orla Maguire (Belfast City Council), Mura Quigley (Belfast City Council), Alan Wardle (Belfast City Council), Debbie Caldwell (Belfast City Council), Ryan Riddle (Belfast City Council), Joe McKearney (Belfast City Council), Jennifer McKinley (Queens University Belfast), Bakul Budhiraja (Queens University Belfast), Adrian Walsh (Friends of Botanic), Colin Shaw (Friends of the Field), Volunteers of Friends of Botanic / Friends of the Field.

Itinerary:

Time	Activity	Notes
10:45	Arrive Lower Botanic Gardens	Met by Alan Wardle (BCC)
11:00 – 11:15	Welcome to APG Members and introduction to UPSURGE	Debbie Caldwell (BCC) Jennifer McKinley (QUB)
11:15 – 11:25	Tour of overall site to note work to date QUB plot and Resilience Garden	Jennifer McKinley / Bakul Budhiraja (QUB) Adrian Walsh (FOBGB) Ryan Riddle (BCC) Alan Wardle (BCC)
11:25 – 11:40	Discussion on biodiversity improvements	Orla Maguire (BCC)
11:40 – 12 noon	Tour of Community Gardens Belfast Sustainable Food Partnership	Volunteers Mura Quigley (BCC)
12 noon – 12:30	Lunch & networking opportunity	All

Background information on the project

Funded through the EU Horizon programme, the UPSURGE Project is testing nature-based solutions to mitigate air pollution and reduce the impact of climate change stressors. The project is being delivered in partnership with four other demonstrator cities across Europe (Breda, Budapest, Katowich and Maribor), with the aim of renaturing urban spaces. The project started in September 2021 and is due to be completed in February 2026. It promotes shared learning and good practice on the management of green spaces to alleviate pollution, support citizen health and promote climate resilience.

Using a codesign process and working in partnership with QUB and local community organisations, the project has identified, developed and tested four key nature-based solutions in Lower Botanic Gardens: 1) agroecological community gardens; 2) soil research testing; 3) habitat enhancement works; and 4) a resilience garden. Nature-based solutions provide long-term, cost-effective measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change, opportunities for active and healthy living, increase self-sufficiency and provide recarbonisation of the soil.



The project is being delivered by Belfast City Council and Queen's University working in partnership with 24 other partner organisations. The site includes a series of research trials which measure the transmission of contaminants to food and plant matter, a community garden and a resilience garden. The installation of environmental sensors is also planned for the site which will measure temperature, humidity, pressure, ozone, Nitric Dioxide (NO), Sulphur Dioxide (SO₂), Particle Matter (Dust) and noise levels.

The project is intended to serve as a 'lighthouse' to accelerate, transfer and upscale the use of nature-based solutions and mainstream them into the urban agenda through co-design processes with citizens and other stakeholders.

A short video on the project can be viewed here <https://youtu.be/LEDdHmUlvU> with further information available on the Upsurge website <https://www.upsurge-project.eu/>

Welcome, Presentations and Tour

On Friday 27 June, Sustainable NI organised a facility visit to the Upsurge Community Garden for local MLAs, Councillors and other observers to increase awareness of an innovative project led by Belfast City Council in close partnership with community groups to test the use of nature-based solutions to climate change.

Debbie Cadwell, Belfast Climate Commissioner, welcomed the group and provided a short overview of the Council's work on climate change adaptation and background information on the Upsurge project.

The project forms part of The Belfast Resilience Strategy which aims to transition the city to an inclusive, net-zero emissions, climate resilient economy in a generation.

Participants were given a guided tour around the garden. Elements of the tour included:

1. A research site testing soil contamination and urban growing
2. An agroecological community growing space and tree nursery
3. A climate resilience garden
4. Habitat restoration and improvement



Visitors met members of the community groups involved in growing in the area and learned of the partnership approach to building place-based research into nature-based solutions. In the past twelve months the community growing space has been established with a polytunnel, raised beds, compostable toilet, an outdoor learning space, and mixed species hedgerow planting. Habitat restoration works have taken place on the grassland to introduce wetland areas to boost biodiversity, improve soil quality and enable natural flood resilience on the site. Other practices on site include: installation of environmental sensors, installation of Solar PV, establishment of rainwater collection and harvesting, hydroseeding, scything, cooking demonstrations, certification of 12 community growers in Permaculture Design, and more. There have also been capital works carried out on the site including new access points and resurfacing of pathways through the space.



This project is recognising the large skills and capacity gaps that currently exist in climate friendly practices in urban growing. It provides an important space for research, learning and knowledge exchange, as well as an important amenity space for the local community whilst helping to boost biodiversity and improve soil quality and flood resilience.

The group also heard from Mura Quigly from Belfast City Council's Climate Team, about the Belfast Sustainable Food Partnership, which acts as a collective voice for the city on key challenges for the food system in Belfast around climate change, biodiversity, food justice, circular economy, urban farming, community growing, food waste and more.

The tour closed with a word of thanks from Danny Donnelly MLA, Chair of the All-Party Group on Climate Action, who thanked project partners and volunteers for their hard work and for sharing their inspiring project with the group. He said he hoped that other councils and community groups would be inspired by the initiative and replicate the good practice in their own areas.

Lunch was provided by [Source Grow](#) who offer fresh, affordable food grown by local producers in a sustainable nature-friendly way.

