

# Final report on the Gynack gardens redevelopment project

## 1. Introduction.

Following completion of the construction phase the aim of this report is to review this community led project; review the processes, report on the outcomes and record lessons learned.

This report is primarily about developing the green space in the Gynack gardens, but it is important to consider this in relation to other projects that are at the planning stages.

The Gynack gardens are at the very heart of Kingussie, opposite the Duke of Gordon Hotel, adjacent to the A86, a trunk road. The Gardens were originally owned by the Hotel but are now owned and managed by the Highland Council. Before this project, the gardens consisted of formal flowers beds, the war memorial, some limited park seating and 3 well-worn interpretive plaques. The majority of the garden was grassed over. There was a metal railing fence at the north end and closed gate at the south end. Although the gardens boasted attractive flower displays in summer, they were otherwise uninviting and under used.





Before and after

## 2. Background

In 2018 Cycle Friendly Kingussie group recognised that a key barrier to encouraging residents in Kingussie to undertake everyday journeys by bike or by foot was the need for improved infrastructure, as well providing better infrastructure for visitors to the town.

Kingussie is built on a hill with the core population living in the main as much as 100m higher than the key facilities with some steep hills to access those facilities. This does make cycling for everyday functions more challenging.

The trunk road (A86) dissects the community along the High Street with the narrow pavements and is a barrier to those less confident on cycle or foot, particularly among the older or younger demographic. There was also a lack of cycle storage/parking facility within the town. The vast majority of journeys involve crossing or travelling along the trunk road.

Heading south from the village to join NC7, The Badenoch or Speyside Ways involves travelling on the B970. The recently installed bridge over the River Spey on this road is single carriageway with restricted views and poses challenges for both pedestrians and cyclists.

In 2019 Cycle Friendly Kingussie, a sub group of Kingussie Community Development Company (KCDC) applied for Community Links funding to identify ways of improving the non motorised infra structure in Kingussie. The chosen consultant AECOM identified 6 potential projects to take forwards.

- Improved link westwards between the Newtonmore path and Gynack Street in the form of a shared use path on the southern side of the A86
- Improvements to the A86 / B970 junction and the surrounding streetscape around the Duke of Gordon Hotel, including improved links to the Gynack garden
- Improvements to the B970 / Spey Street junction and surrounding streetscape adjacent to the Silverfjord Hotel, including improved links into the memorial garden and safer crossings for pedestrian movements
- Improved active travel link to the east of the town centre with the construction of a shared use path on the existing route to the Waste Water Treatment Works in the east. The route would make use of existing rail underpass when turning north and could include measures to link into the community allotment.
- Upgrade to the existing off-road route along the Woodland Path towards Ruthven Barracks. Would involve construction of a dedicated 2.5 metre shared use path to better facilitate cycle movements.
- Public Realm improvements seeking to enhance the potential of existing green space. Specifically includes looking at the memorial garden and the vacant area of land adjacent to the Bowling green



AECOM concept plan

### **3. Sustrans Places for Everyone projects in Kingussie**

KCDC(CFK) applied for funding through the Sustrans “Places for Everyone “ scheme to take forwards 3 of the projects identified above:

- Improvements to the A86 / B970 junction and the surrounding streetscape around the Duke of Gordon Hotel, including improved links to the Gynack garden. Public Realm improvements seeking to enhance the potential of existing green space.
- Improvements to the B970 / Spey Street junction and surrounding streetscape adjacent to the Silverfjord Hotel, including improved links into the memorial garden and safer crossings for pedestrian movements
- Improved link westwards between the Newtonmore path and Gynack Street in the form of a shared use path on the southern side of the A86

A fourth project was also taken on, without Sustrans support

- Upgrade to the existing off-road route along the Woodland Path towards Ruthven Barracks. With construction of a dedicated 2.5 metre shared use path to better facilitate cycle movements (Achieved 2020 with the support of CNPA and KVCC) and to improve the cycling and walking route between Kingussie and Ruthven barracks. (On going)

### **4. Objectives**

Within the community CFK identified the need to connect Residents (and visitors) with - Schools, Doctors, Highland Council HQ, Badenoch Centre, Schools, Railway Station, High Street Shops, Cafe's and Restaurants.

CFK wanted to find better ways to connect the community (and visitors) with - NC7, Badenoch Way, Speyside Way, and A9 NMU route. The Cairngorms National Park is an area of outstanding opportunity for active travel either for social or commuting purposes. The area benefits from significant investment in local active travel routes including; A9 NMU route between Aviemore, Kingussie and Newtonmore, The Badenoch Way, The Speyside Way and National Cycle Route 7.

The following objectives were identified for the Places for Everyone” projects in Kingussie.

#### **Objective 1**

Increase the number of pupils (and staff) attending the schools in Kingussie who travel (either independently or with parents) by bike and foot and reduce the number of car journeys by improving non-motorised transport routes within the project area.

## Objective 2

Increase the number of short journeys made by bike and foot (by Kingussie residents and visitors) to the High Street facilities, Railway Station, Local Authority Area HQ by improving non-motorised transport routes within the project area.

## Objective 3

To safely connect the population centres and the High Street of Kingussie to our local National and Regional active travel routes including; National Cycle Route 7, the Badenoch Way, the Speyside Way and any NMU developed as part of the A9 dualling

## **5. The opportunity**

The opportunity to develop the garden project as the first priority was driven by the potential to attract match funding, an essential element of Sustrans funded projects. This matched funding primarily came from the Highland Council Town Centre transition fund (57k) and secondly indirect match funding from footpath work being undertaken by the Cairngorms National Park Authority in Glenmore. If this funding had not been available the project priority would have almost certainly been the extension of the Sustrans route from Newtonmore (currently at developed design status). Matched funding also influenced the timeline of the project in that the Town Centre Fund had to be committed in the financial year 20/21.

## **6. The design phases**

A sub group of KCDC was created to work on the project and they developed the original concept plans taken from the AECOM proposals, prior to engaging a design consultant (TGP). Initially this caused some additional work as the consultant company wanted to provide their own design ideas. Eventual agreement was reached, planning permission was granted by Highland Council.

The main matched funding partner was the Highland Council, the owner of the gardens. There was a continual parallel agenda throughout the planning and construction phases to meet the requirements of both Highland Council and Sustrans.

## **7. The construction phase process**

The procurement was through the Scottish public procurement process. This was an onerous task for a volunteer community group without a professional officer. This is likely to be a one off, or infrequent process for any community group, simply learning the process was an additional task to applying it.

McGowan Construction was awarded the contract. Another local firm showed interest but decided not to provide a quote. They did express some concerns

about some of the clarity of the drawings/design. At the time it was not believed this was an issue, but later this transpired to be a significant issue that ultimately increased the cost of the project.

The first Covid lockdown had an indirect impact on the timings of construction. The construction company started work 6 weeks later than initially planned, due to a backlog of other projects. Work commenced in October 2020, leaving no growing season for landscape (grass) repair and the risk of winter weather interrupting progress. The original timeline was for completion by November 2020 rather than March 2021. From January to late February it was not possible to make any progress due to hard frost and snow on the ground.

The construction process was managed by an appropriately qualified consultant as the Community group did not have the necessary qualifications to meet CDM regulations. The Consultant chosen was from the design company: TGP. Having already built up a relationship with the design company this seemed to be a sensible and reasonable choice. It was only later when questions about the interpretation of the design drawings became apparent that any weakness in this arrangement transpired.

The design drawings, bill of quantities and design visuals did not identify the height changes and impacts of slope angles that subsequently led to additional fill and extra turfing that created project creep.

Now that the work is complete it is clear there would have been no other way to address the height differences and meet DDA regulation but this was unexpected and an additional expense. In addition, there was concern from both the community group and feedback from the wider community to a significant change from the original plan. In the end compromises had to be made, specifically around the reinstating of the flowerbeds. In addition, design decisions around the gabion seating had to be modified to create an acceptable design.

The construction management process was further complicated by Covid restrictions, which meant most communication with both the construction Management Company and Sustrans Infra-structure officer had to be online. The value of an informal chat over a cup of coffee cannot be overplayed. KCDC believe Covid had a significant impact on the capacity for Highland Council to directly support the project at the time.

## **8. Engagement with the community**

Throughout the planning and construction process regular updates and press stories were published. KCDC directors met with the public in the Park, over several days at different times, this provided ideas and feedback on the proposals. A community notice board was placed at the front of the building site to provide up to date information and there were regular updates on the KCDC website and in the local paper. In view of continued Covid restrictions and recommendations it was decided to celebrate the completion and opening of the gardens through a press article and letter in the local paper, rather than



a live event. This took place during the week prior to the first public event: The Cairngorms Farmers market on the 20<sup>th</sup> June 2021.

Apart from the issue with the slope angles and the necessary loss of some flowerbeds KCDC only received positive feedback from the community through the build programme.



Local children enjoying various “wheeled” forms of recreation

### Behaviour change

Now that the gardens have re-opened the general feedback has been overwhelmingly very positive. The new entrance to the school is very popular and has improved safety as well as the quality of non motorised journey to and from school. There is an increased use of the gardens, particularly by younger family groups taking advantage of the paths to use scooters, roller skates and bicycles. People are using the gardens to go from/to the Station to the town centre. When the weather is good the new seating in the garden has been noticeably well used. The farmers market is planned to be a monthly event in the summer and Scottish Opera is scheduled to hold a “pop up” event in July.

Early project evaluation reinforces the need for traffic calming at the north end of the gardens now that there is no physical barrier/ wall between the gardens

and the trunk road and further safety consideration for designing the south entrance as part of the Spey street project.



New furniture built by KCDC volunteers





Flower beds reinstated on completion of the project



Families using the new facilities to go to the Primary School

## **9. Equal opportunities considerations**

Throughout the project KCDC maintained and updated an equal opportunities considerations document. This has now been posted on the Sustrans portal. This process identified a number of potential issues, mainly around disability and age, that influenced final designs.

## **10. Monitoring and maintenance**

KCDC did carry out some baseline monitoring prior to the project commencing. Sustrans have also carried out some monitoring; Future monitoring requirements are being discussed with Sustrans.

Highland Council owns the site and have undertaken to continue to maintain the gardens. Public liability and maintenance remains with HC. TGP are providing the necessary as built drawings and paperwork to complete the governance handover issues. Snagging continues, the contract incorporates a 2.5% retainer.

## **11. Headline financial summary**

2019/20: £35k claimed from Sustrans for design for all three projects

2020/21: £25K claimed form Sustrans for design for all three projects

Total project cost: construction £ 275,867

Contribution by Highland Council £57,000

Contribution by Sustrans including indirect match funding £ 218,000



Banners for events

## 12. Lessons learned

### a. Community capacity to manage projects:

KCDC is an active community group committed to various improvement projects in the town: An on-going hydro scheme that creates income for the community, an active paths maintenance programme, the Cycle Friendly Kingussie programme of activities as well as other projects. To add three concurrent Sustrans projects which have been managed by a working group of three was on hindsight, very ambitious. Given also the accountability of public sector finance and governance, complicated further with accounting to two different public bodies: HC and Sustrans, with the added challenges of Covid means there is now an element of volunteer fatigue.

Consideration should be given to build into the budgets the need for a part time professional officer when a community group takes on relatively large construction projects. The time frame from inception to construction for the average Sustrans project is 5 years. The project team, involved also in other community activities spent on average 10 hours a week each (sub-group of 3) and at times were working almost full time on various volunteer duties during the construction phase. The actual hours committed to specifically managing



the garden project were not measured, but as a conservative estimate between 1,000 and 1500 hours over 2.5 years.

b. Avoiding potential conflicts of interest.

The consultant engaged to manage the building project should be clearly working in the best interests of the community group. If this person is also employed by the design company, there is the potential for a conflict of interest.



Cycle shelter, secure cycle parking and maintenance facility

c. Managing the finances

The financial aspect of running three projects over more than one financial year, with accountability to more than two public funding bodies makes the financial accounting element more complex than that which would normally be expected of a volunteer treasurer. The Sustrans portal is logical once it is understood. More of a challenge was the unrealistic expectation to manage a large financial project without a level of financial reserves within the organisation. Sustrans were able to provide an advance of grant, nevertheless the time it takes to process grants (30 days) meant that at times KCDC was technically insolvent. This resulted in stress and concern within the community group. Sustrans did acknowledge this as an issue for community bodies and were willing to address their internal processes as much as possible. It should

be stated that the relationship with Sustrans staff was very supportive and professional throughout the entire project.



New lighting around the war memorial and along the paths

## 12. Key outputs

- The transformation of the town gardens to a welcoming, non motorised, green dwelling place.
- The creation of safe space for young to enjoy cycling and walking. approx. 4000sq metres (traffic calming at the north perimeter is still required).
- The gardens will become a non motorised travel hub, through the creation of quality paths suitable for all non-motorised forms of travel through and around the garden. Linking the train station, High school and people arriving form Route 7 or the Speyside Way with the centre of the town.



- A new entrance to the primary school making a safer and more pleasant way to travel to school specifically by bike or on foot.
- The creation 300sq metres of plaza style space creating a town square facility, suitable for pop up events, a meeting place, or just a dwelling place.
- The planting of a town Christmas tree, with electrical connection. This will become the focal point when there are town festivities (funded separately by KCDC).
- The creation of space for public art that enhances the site and becomes a focal point for visitors and residents. (HC have recently rejected plans for the use of the space at the front of the gardens for public art work, but it is understood that HC will make provision an Indian War memorial closer to the current War memorial).
- Creation of secure and covered cycle parking close to the town centre (funded separately by Cycling Scotland).
- Creation of a cycle maintenance facility (funded by Cycling Scotland).
- New lighting for the War memorial and solar lighting on the main path to the primary school.
- Improved community leadership, capacity and knowledge to work in partnership with public agencies on future potential projects.



### **13 Next steps**

The effectiveness of this transformed space will be much improved with the completion of the further two Sustrans projects currently at development stages. It is hopeful that the Spey Street junction project can be completed year 21/22 , funds were available in 20/21, but it is only very recently that planning permission has been granted. Matched funding has already been identified, therefore in principle this project is potentially fully funded by both Sustrans and Highland Council ( Safe routes to school budget).

In order to progress this work it will require a strong partnership approach with Highland Council. The next step is for Sustrans to provide a briefing to local Councillors as soon as they are available. This work will help to strengthen the link from the railway and south entrance to the town to the town centre, as well as making the junction safer and more attractive.

The final Sustrans project is the completion of the Sustrans path from Newtonmore into the centre of Kingussie. The road through the town is a trunk road and this makes this development more challenging. The next phase will be to engage, once again, with the community to consider how to make the final part of this route practical and safe. Following trials in Border towns it is hoped that Transport Scotland will agree to reduced speed limits near the centre of the town. In addition it will be necessary to source additional match funding for this project. CNPA Heritage Horizons funding is a potential source of funding, assuming their bid is successful.

KCDC will continue to look at options to improve the route from Kingussie to Ruthven Barracks. Initially this may include safety road signage. There is also the potential through A9 dualling community mitigation funding to look at safer route options. This work is complicated by the floodplain.

This report does not cover the second grant of Town Centre Funds allocated to KCDC for various further improvements to the garden.

### **14. Conclusion**

From a community perspective KCDC believe this has been a hugely successful Community led project, achieved through challenging Covid communication restrictions. The full impact of this work can only be achieved with the fulfilment of the remaining 2 infrastructure projects. This will require a strong partnership approach with both Sustrans and the Highland Council.

This report has been compiled by the KCDC project team.

7th July 2021

end