

Inverurie Environmental Improvement Group (IEI)

Charity Number SC034357

Overview

Inverurie Environmental Improvement Group (IEI) was constituted as a registered charity on the second of April 2003 (Charity Number SC034357) with an address at 1a High Street, Inverurie, Aberdeenshire AB51 3QA.

IEI's objectives are (1) To promote horticulture in and around Inverurie for the benefit of the public by encouraging the provision of displays of flowers, shrubs, trees and landscaping in places visible to the public; and (2) To advance the education of the public concerning the natural environment through the development of environmental programmes.

Inverurie is a market town in Aberdeenshire at the confluence of the rivers Ury and Don. It is a popular location in which to live and raise a family. Although the High Street faces the same economic challenges as elsewhere it still manages to portray a vibrant town centre with many local independent traders still in business today.

IEI was formed as a horticultural charity in 2003. It has enhanced the appearance of the town with an annual floral display of hanging baskets and tiered planters for the benefit of the local residents and visitors to the town or people passing through the town travelling to other destinations. Although the hanging baskets are mainly planted with summer bedding plants IEI is increasing its use of perennial plants every year as they are more sustainable and will bloom at different stages throughout the year.

The hanging baskets continue to be planted by the service users at the Pitscurry Project, Pitcaple. This is one of the highlights of the year for the service users as they enjoy the activity and take great pride in their work especially when they see the hanging baskets in situ in the town centre.

IEI organises the annual Inverurie Best Garden Competition for residential and non-residential gardens to encourage the local community to get involved in making the town look vibrant whilst receiving the praise and recognition they deserve for their efforts.

IEI works closely with local community groups including Inverurie Rotary, Inverurie Men's Shed, Ury Riverside Park SCIO, Inverurie Community Council, Grampian Opportunities, Inspire by Inverurie, the Pitscurry Project and Inverurie DAYS (Daily Activities with Support). We also provide compost and plants to sheltered housing complexes and help the residents who are no longer capable of doing physical gardening work.

IEI were awarded the Beautiful Scotland Gold Medal Certificate 2025 for the medium town category. IEI also received the Beautiful Scotland 2025 Community Involvement Award and a Keep Scotland Beautiful (KSB) Discretionary Award.

IEI is very proud to be considered as joint runner up with Blooming Haddington for the KSB Rosebowl Award 2025. The Rosebowl, the most prestigious award, was won by East Lothian's North Berwick in Bloom.

Specific Challenges

Sensory Garden

Inverurie resident Phyllis Smith and her son David identified the need for a ‘Therapeutic Garden’ whilst working with families whose children were physically disabled and/or autistic. Trellis is funding the design process plans. IEI has donated the slabs, sand and cement to allow the project to get off the ground. The garden is being developed within the Community Allotments site. The sensory garden will be available to all community groups and service providers who wish to have a secure open space to enjoy for organised activities or relaxation within the sensory garden. The adjoining polytunnel and allotments may also be of interest to the community group of service users to be involved with.



Inverurie DAYS (Daily Activities with Support)

The Service users from Pitscurry in association with their colleagues from Inverurie DAYS (Daily Activities with Support) created a patio area with gravel beside the summer house that IEI erected as an outdoor recreational space for service users to enjoy.



Pitscurry & Inverurie DAYS service users creating a gravelled area at their Day Centre

The implementation of Aberdeenshire’s Learning Disability Strategy ‘Be All You Can Be’ has led to a reduction in the number of service users who are eligible for an in-house buildings-based service. This strategy has led to the closure of the Buzzard Café with fewer service users at Pitscurry. This in turn creates uncertainty and anxiety within the service user community as to the future plans for the facilities they use.

Volunteers: Who is Involved?

Rotary Club of Inverurie

Inverurie Rotary Club members provide support to IEI with help to put up and take down the hanging baskets. Rotary volunteers also help with the watering. IEI in turn support the Rotary Purple4Polio campaign by purchasing and planting the purple Crocus corms.

Rotary are also involved with many other community projects as well. Leading by example, the Rotary Club of Inverurie play a key role in achieving these awards with their volunteering within the community. This collaboration of local groups working together in Inverurie, for the benefit of all the community, has been recognised by Keep Scotland Beautiful with Gold Medal Certificate Awards and Community Involvement Awards.



Rotary & IEI Volunteers putting up the hanging baskets

The Beginning Garden Group

IEI formed a gardening group of Syrian teenagers from Inverurie Academy to provide support to the residents of Urybank Sheltered Home who are no longer able to maintain their garden. The teenagers named their group The Beginning Garden Group as 'planting a seed or sapling is the beginning of life for that plant or tree'.

The group completed their Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Awards and IEI provided testimony for volunteering based on their work at Urybank. The gardens have been transformed. The tasks undertaken include maintaining protective clothing and tools, digging, weeding, pruning, edging the grass, planting out floral displays, digging out raised beds and replacing with manure and topsoil before planting vegetables, painting timber and tyre planters. The Syrian volunteers worked under the guidance of residents Jim Duff and Marjory Benjamin, keen gardeners who pass on their horticultural knowledge to them. As well as learning new skills the group expanded their command of English with a new vocabulary in horticulture.

The gardens have brought enjoyment and satisfaction to the residents and volunteers. Residents now have a wonderful floral display of colour and tidy garden to look out at. Wheelchair bound residents can enjoy the recreational value of the garden and being part of the activity of the volunteers.

The Beginning Garden Group take great pride in their volunteer work and in the friendships formed with the residents. They also understand the therapeutic value of gardening and have raised the spirits of the residents.

The Beginning Garden Group received a Green Butterfly Award from Aberdeenshire Environmental Forum for their volunteering work at Urybank and a Horticultural Achievement Discretionary Award from IEI. Keep Scotland Beautiful also presented IEI with the 'Intergenerational Discretionary Award – All Ages Working Together '.



The Beginning Garden Group with Urybank resident Jim Duff



The Beginning Garden Group with Urybank resident Marjorie Benjamin planting seed tatties

As this Syrian group of pupils are now well assimilated into the community and have moved on to college IEI have new volunteers who are involved in gardening at Urybank and other sheltered housing complexes in the town.

Activities

Pitscurry Service Users

The plants from the hanging baskets and town planters are composted at Pitscurry with the compost used within the Pitscurry site. The wildflower terraced garden below the Buzzard Café is an example of on-site composting being put to good effect. The service users grow their own vegetables, herbs and fruit which is used in their own kitchen and also served to the public in the Buzzard Café. The Buzzard Café also provides a working environment for service users to learn and develop new skills.



Pitscurry Project

Pitscurry set up a training workshop involving all the service users in learning the skills of putting together a hanging basket. The service users put new wicks, mats and compost into the baskets before planting them. It gives valuable experience to people with learning difficulties and they great pride in being part of this horticultural project and contributing to their local community. They do a fantastic job every year in seeing the hanging baskets in Inverurie town centre and the pleasure they bring to residents and visitors to the town.



Inverurie West Church Community Garden and Acorn Centre Cafe

The Community Garden was developed on waste ground behind West Church Hall. The garden provides vegetables and herbs for the kitchen in the Acorn Centre Cafe and cut flowers to make small flower posies for the cafe tables. The garden also provides horticultural activity space for service users from Inspire by Inverurie to carry out gardening projects with people who need support. Inspire is more than just a charity – it's a forward-thinking social care organisation that's helping people with learning disabilities and additional support needs live full, employment-orientated and independent lives. A group of Syrian women from the Al-Amal & Friends Project also participate in the gardening activity.



Inspire by Inverurie Jane Rennie receiving the IEI Award for the Community Garden

Inverurie Best Garden Competition

The Gardening Competition is run annually by IEI for residents, commercial, and non-commercial premises. The aim of the Best Garden Award competition is to draw attention to the contribution that Inverurie's many gardeners make to the visual quality of the town and to encourage others to do the same. This is an excellent opportunity for the local community to get involved in making the town look attractive, whilst receiving the praise and recognition they deserve for their efforts in maintaining wonderful gardens. The judge looks for good use of colour and form in the garden as well as imaginative design, a long season of interest, and environmental sensitivity.



Douglas Paterson Best Garden Winner 2024

Environmentally Friendly Practices

Ury Riverside Park:

Ury Riverside Park is a 138-acre community park for people and wildlife to enjoy together. The Park is being developed by the community for the community from former arable farmland on the floodplain of the River Ury. The park is being developed with a high-quality path network with good connectivity to the town centre and surrounding housing estates. The park is part of the Parkrun UK network of weekly 5k community running / walking events.

There are areas of semi-natural wetland, riparian habitats, new native woodlands, wildflower meadows and amenity grassland. The park supports breeding skylarks, common partridge, reed buntings, yellowhammers, and sedge warblers. Otters and trout live in the river along with a range of dragonflies and damselflies. The wildflower meadows attract a range of pollinators such as butterflies, bees, hoverflies etc. Key awards: KSB Garden for Life Biodiversity Award 2024, RHS Britain in Bloom Discretionary Award (Gardening for Wildlife), and Green Flag Awards.



Ury Riverside Park Green Flag Community Award, and ground-nesting skylarks

The Scottish Invasive Species Initiative (SISI) is an ambitious partnership project set up to tackle invasive non-native species alongside rivers and watercourses in Northern Scotland. The River Ury is the biggest tributary of the River Don. Jan Simpson, Officer River Dee Trust, has employed contractors to provide continuous treatment for a number of years to clear the infestation of giant hogweed along the length of the Ury. The long-term aim is for landowners to take responsibility for treating any infestation on their own land. The Trustees of the Ury Riverside Park SCIO already spray their area and also use a herd of sheep to graze an enclosed fenced-off area. Due to a pigment in their skin, the sheep are not affected by the giant hogweed.

Some local provenance wet meadow perennial wildflower seed was planted in some of the areas of bare soil which will help stabilise the soil and in time some of the perennial wildflower plants will replace the giant hogweed where the sheep are grazing.



Composting

At the end of the season the plants from the hanging baskets and the planters are taken by Rotary volunteers to Pitscurry where they are composted by the service users. The compost is used by the service users within the Pitscurry site creating wild flower areas to attract pollinators. The compost is also used in the fruit and vegetable plots to grow fresh produce to be used in their own canteen and the Buzzard Café.



Composting bays at Pitscurry, compost used in creating the butterfly garden for pollinators

Maxus eDeliver3 Electric Van

IEI purchased a Maxus eDeliver3 Electric Van with grants from the Vattenfall Unlock Our Future Fund and Aberdeenshire Council Garioch Area Fund. The vehicle has a battery operated pumping system for watering the hanging baskets and town centre planters. The operation of the electric van reduces IEI's carbon footprint and improves the air quality of the town centre when in operation.



Summer bedding plants being watered by IEI's electric vehicle

Challenges / Barriers

IEI supports local community groups with their community projects and initiatives.

School Initiatives

An Aberdeenshire Council schools' pilot project called 'Grow It Cook It Eat It'. As part of this initiative IEI supplied and delivered tattie bags, seed tatties and compost to twenty schools. The pilot project had relatively good success with schools taking up training and starting to grow and, in some instances, cook with the produce they had grown. Although the pilot project was subsequently put on hold due to a team member moving post, some schools have continued with their own gardening projects.

The Kellands Primary School have an allotment for teachers and pupils to learn and have fun in growing their own vegetables. The experience and skills learned at an early age in horticulture can lead to a lifetime hobby of gardening which can be enjoyed at any age.

The pupils also continue to be involved at Inverurie Hospital. P6 pupils are active throughout the year helping to maintain and enhance the Donbank Ward Garden.

The challenge facing these projects is Local Authority financial constraints and teacher resources. It also requires teachers to have training in horticultural matters to enable them to pass on these skills to their pupils.



Kellands School P6 pupils with IEI Award for Donbank Ward Garden, and School Allotment

IEI's Finances

IEI receives an annual contribution from the Inverurie Business Improvement District (BID) as part of their 5 year business plan. The BID is up for renewal every 5 years depending on a positive vote of confidence from the business community. This brings a certain amount of uncertainty as the 5 year cycle comes around again.

IEI Volunteers

IEI has a small committee of four members and the challenge is getting more members on board. IEI is fortunate to have good relationships with other community groups to call upon for assistance when required. However, all community groups are having the same challenges and it is getting more difficult to attract new volunteers. It is quite common for the same individuals to be involved in different groups, a form of cross fertilisation which is not sustainable in the long run. As these same volunteers grow older then succession of trustees and committee members becomes an issue.

Pitscurry Project – Buzzard Cafe

Unfortunately a decision has been made by the Integration Joint Board (The Health Board & Local Authority) to close the Buzzard Café in July 2025 and decommission the building as part of the review of in-house learning disability day services and roll out of Learning Disability Strategy 'Be All You Can Be'. Such are the challenges facing many organisations, social enterprises and charities with changes to funding models and demands on limited resources.



Raised beds for growing vegetables to be used in the Buzzard Café – ‘from plot to plate’

Inverurie DAYS (Daily Activities with Support)

Inverurie DAYS is a day service for adults with disabilities with a range of activities including gardening based at the Inverurie Day Centre, and at Pitscurry. Care Leader Sarah Gray took over the sensory tunnel at the Pitscurry Project with one of her groups of service users. They gutted the tunnel over the winter period taking it back to the bare minimum, cutting back an old jasmine vine and a hop vine, painted and tidied it up, emptying pots and weeding. All the waste was taken to their own compost heaps for recycling. One of their activities was to plant their own flowers, lupins, salvia, dwarf carnations, scented stock, tom thumbs, sweet peas, sunflowers of all different sizes and varieties, lavender (from seed), cosmos, wildflowers, poppies, and Sarah's favourite, zinnias and many varieties of bulbs.

Sarah said ‘this has been an amazing activity that has been done by people requiring either one to one support or a small group of individuals throughout the year. From growing the seeds, re-potting and planting into large pots and raised beds in the sensory tunnel and café decking. The plants were also taken down to the Inverurie Day Centre to brighten up the car park and garden area. As always, the gardens are a work in progress. We can't always get into the garden at the Inverurie Day Centre due to the weather, or our service users physical abilities but we try and make the most of when we can’.

Sarah also commented ‘that IEI have been an amazing support to us. IEI's vice-chair Ian Mitchell has joined us on many occasions supporting our Thursday gardeners' group to come to the Inverurie Day Centre to help tidy up the garden, offer support and advice, donate plants and compost. In return the service users help by planting summer bedding in various planters around the Inverurie War Memorial Garden and various other sites in Inverurie Town Centre.

Pitscurry project gardeners also support the community by creating all the amazing hanging baskets that can be seen around Inverurie’.

Images of the work in progress at the Pitscurry sensory polytunnel.



Pride in Inverurie – Being Involved

In 2016 IEI decided to enter the Keep Scotland Beautiful (KSB) ‘It’s Your Neighbour’ competition. This is non-competitive but is still judged under the 3 pillars of Horticultural Achievement, Environmental Responsibility, and Community Involvement as in Beautiful Scotland. IEI received a Level 4 ‘Thriving’ certificate and in the following year received a Level 5 ‘Outstanding’ certificate. Having ‘learned the ropes’, IEI felt confident to enter the Beautiful Scotland competition in 2018 and we have continued to enter every year since.

I cannot overstate the importance that being part of the KSB family has been to IEI and the town of Inverurie. The networking opportunity of meeting other like-minded individuals trying their best to enhance and improve the appearance of their own communities has been immense. The KSB staff have been very supportive and professional in providing advice and encouragement to communities in their endeavours to improve their own towns and villages.

The KSB judges who are passionate volunteers in their own right have a wonderful gift of communicating with the people they meet on their visits. Their enthusiasm and genuine interest in what people are trying to achieve leaves a positive lasting impression on the individuals they take the time to meet. People take a pride in what they have to show to the KSB judges who in turn respond with a recognition and an acknowledgement that the individual or community group’s efforts are worthwhile. The KSB judges offer to give advice if required or asked for from the community participants. They share from their own experiences in the field of horticulture.

I understand that KSB are not immune from the cost of living and funding challenges that face us all. I can safely say that without the support and encouragement of KSB then Inverurie and other communities could not continue to achieve or maintain their level of volunteering within their communities from which we all benefit.