



Sustainable
URBAN FRINGES
SURF

Aberdeen Reflection Report

R i v e r D o n C o r r i d o r



March 2012

The SURF Aberdeen project is being led by Aberdeen City Council's Sustainable Development Team. We are working in partnership with a range of partners from across the Council and City, including: Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Forestry Commission Scotland, River Don Trust and Aberdeen Greenspace Trust. We have also commissioned the expertise of Land Use Consultants to assist us in delivering a successful project.

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Fingerposts on the Donside

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1. Introduction

The **Sustainable Urban Fringes (SURF) Project** brings together partners and experts from across the North Sea Region to exchange information and develop a common approach towards the sustainability of urban fringes.

Urban fringes are the areas between urban and rural landscape. These spaces are often neglected and under threat from growth and expansion and inconsistent spatial planning policy.

The project recognises the value urban fringes can bring to local communities creating places where people want to live, work and do business. This can be through strengthening local economies; delivering social benefits and by creating a space for nature.

The project ran from September 2009 to March 2013. Key initiatives include: a review of urban fringe policies; and the development of a set of policy guidelines to tackle issues of governance and spatial planning.

Project partners developed their own urban fringe initiatives to establish best practice and share their experiences with project partners and the wider community.



SURF Project partners, meeting in Enschede, Netherlands in June 2010

The **SURF Aberdeen Project** is one of the SURF Project partner initiatives.

The *primary theme* which is one of the 4 themes of the wider SURF Project, is:

- Spatial planning and stakeholder engagement: Coordinated and participative responses to pressure change.

The *physical scope* of the Project is:

- The 'River Don Corridor', Aberdeen – an urban fringe area made up of the River Don and surrounding open spaces, from the North Sea coast to the Aberdeenshire countryside. It is an area under pressure of development and likely to undergo significant change in the years ahead.



River Don Corridor – Indicative project boundary (Not to scale)

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The *Project's aim* is to:

- Develop and promote new methods for assessing and managing open spaces along the River Don corridor, for the benefit of the local economy, environment and communities.

The *Project's objectives* are to:

1. Develop an accessible Geographical Information Systems (GIS) tool to assist with spatial planning of open space.
2. Conduct a participative programme of community engagement activities, using GIS, to improve local decision making.
3. Develop a spatial plan, in collaboration with the community, to guide development & direct improvements to open space.
4. Access funding and work with communities to implement several improvements to open spaces in line with the spatial plan.
5. Work collaboratively with transnational partners to meet the aim and objectives of the parent SURF project.

In brief, this project brings people and organisations together with information, tools and techniques to develop a more collective approach to the planning & management of open spaces along the River Don corridor.

2. The opportunity for change

SURF Project participants were supported to undertake Strengths | Weaknesses | Opportunities | Threats (SWOT) analysis to build an understanding of situation that existed within their urban fringe project areas.

A 'quick & dirty' SWOT was conducted early in the SURF Project to help identify the specific urban fringe context participants were working in, and identify the key issues that needed to be considered and / or addressed in the SURF projects.

The SURF Project team brought the findings from the various SWOT analyses together to build a common picture of the issues facing urban fringes across all the project areas. Another SWOT exercise was conducted toward the end of the SURF projects as a means to reflect on what had, or had not, changed as a result of the Project(s).

SURF Aberdeen also undertook an additional SWOT exercise as part of its participative community engagement programme – to help local participants build a shared understanding of the key issues locally, and to help inform planning work associated with the project. The SWOTs relating to Aberdeen's urban fringe areas are not unlike those for most others.

This section, including the four tables below, revisits the SWOT analysis for Aberdeen and reflects on the key changes noted as a result of this project, or the lack thereof.



Construction of a new Donside path at the site of the former Donside Paper Mill

Strengths	
Competitiveness, economy & enterprise	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • River supports sport & recreation – currently fishing & adventure sports economy • River supports industry - one mill still operating and employing 450 people • Area supports innovation – technology park in pleasant working surroundings • Area supports education – University located adjacent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These strengths still exist and have been somewhat exploited. Making the most of these will take longer than the SURF Project • ‘Visioning’ through the River Don Corridor Framework development process has been positive. The Framework, coupled with other local activities, support and build on existing local economies while having the potential to attract investment • Refocusing people and organisations to this urban fringe has encouraged an increase in activities, e.g. new river sport • The Framework brings a focus the quality of spaces in the area – this could encourage people & organisations to locate here • Unable to engage all stakeholders, e.g. local University • New strength: Potential for greenspace resources as direct economic benefit, e.g. woodland for biomass
Governance	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with Statutory Bodies, Industries, Knowledge Institutes, landowners and communities living along the urban fringe • Active community planning network and the Neighbourhood Networks to build on • Link in with Aberdeen’s outdoor plans and policies e.g. Core Path Plan, Nature Conservation Strategy, Outdoor Access Strategy, Local Biodiversity Action Plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These strengths still exist and have been well exploited: • Cross-agency relationships already reasonably positive. Project has very much strengthened these and created a platform (River Don Communities Network) that has strengthened agency to community and cross-community relationships • However, connection with neighbouring local authority was not exploited. There is the potential to do this in the future • Project team linked well with existing projects and developments planned and taking place in the area. This has helped to ensure policy & plans for the area complement one another

Strengths	
Spatial planning & stakeholder engagement	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work on new Local Development Plan (LDP) and associated related policies and strategies ongoing, e.g. Open Space Strategy, Green Space Network, etc. • Link with other ongoing local work to meet requirements under the European Union Water Framework and Habitats Directives • Number of existing City policies relate to sustainable development e.g. Community Regeneration Strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengths exist and have been exploited, but have changed: • The River Don Corridor Framework may become legal guidance. This was unexpected and could influence planning in this fringe for the next 20 years. But, but the Framework arrived during the LDP process and there may be issues retro-fitting it into the Plan in the next few years • The Framework has linked very well with other spatial planning policy & guidance, to complement it and build on the strengths of the urban fringe, i.e. Open Space Strategy & Masterplans • Framework development process, including engagement, has provided a model for fringe planning. This is soon to be tested in another area • Plan has been good for raising the profile of the Don corridor
Role & value of green spaces	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to river for recreation & sport (Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 – provides for full responsible access for public to most land & water) • Some high quality paths with connections between separate communities • Industrial heritage retained on site • Lots of diverse & well established greenspaces • Wonderful biodiversity & geomorphology evident • Nature conservation - Local Nature Reserve and Local Nature Conservation Site in urban fringe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These strengths still exist. Project time-scale and limited funding means little opportunity to build on these immediately. Changes will take place through delivery of the Framework: now to 2030 • Involvement of communities and agencies helped to bring a new focus to this area that will deliver beyond the project. Engagement through new media has spurred new activity on the ground in the short-term also • Quick wins through small on the ground improvements (e.g. volunteer events) have improved access & perceptions of area • SURF has kept minds focused on greenspaces under development pressure and how this can be better managed • New strength: recognition of greenspace for climate change mitigation / adaptation, i.e. flooding management and carbon sequestration

Weaknesses	
Competitiveness, economy & enterprise	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Declining water and landscape quality affecting tourism and leisure industry, i.e. water treatment works & industrial estates Social deprivation in surrounding communities not attracting economic innovation Reducing public sector funding available for investment / maintenance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Correction: Water quality is actually improving, despite occasional pollution incidents Weaknesses still exist and are being addressed. Unlikely to significantly change in the timescale of the SURF Aberdeen Project Redevelopment plans for most of the former mill brownfield sites, coupled with the River Don Corridor Framework, will improve landscape quality and encourage people to live, visit and invest in the area New communities, facilities and improved access should help to attract economic innovation Increasing weakness: Public sector finances increasingly less
Governance	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fragmented ownership of urban fringes means it is necessary to bring communities and stakeholders to one platform. This poses a challenge for governance Lack of focus & identity for the fringe area Differing social needs of communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weaknesses still exist, but are being addressed. Some changes already noted: The SURF project has had great success in bringing people together - River Don Communities Network. This has helped to foster a joint vision (Framework) and identity New community activity has 'emerged' from these connections, i.e. ad hoc volunteering, establishment of a development trust Communities have better expressed and managed their shared concerns, i.e. communicating and collaborating about pollution issues through Facebook group But...What will happen to these new community structures now (Network & facebook)?

Weaknesses	
Spatial planning & stakeholder engagement	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Currently inequality in terms of spatial planning between - more affluent areas surrounding the River Dee in the south of the city which has better quality water and greenspace and the areas surrounding the River Don in the north of the city River Don has large amounts of greenspace which will potentially be affected by new housing developments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New Local Development Plan and associated Policies and Guidance, including the River Don Corridor Framework, have strengthened open space & green space network requirements. This has helped to set the framework to address these issues Some of the benefits may be seen in the shorter term (years), but many of these long-term benefits more likely over decades
Role & value of green spaces	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complexity of land use and ownership means settlements are geographically separated have poor access to green space with limited social interaction; Inconsistent path network around river, including lack of river crossings & poor access to river corridor from wider communities, i.e. Bucksburn, due to A96 road Much greenspace fails to meet quality standards: Low quality spaces, poor maintenance & feeling unsafe, Lack of signage & interpretation, on & off site, Industrial heritage neglected and declining, Litter / flytipping reduces attractiveness Water quality issues, invasive species, excessive weed growth due to pollution is affecting the river water quality, which will have a direct impact on fish population affecting local tourism economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These weaknesses still very much exist, with some being addressed over the short term and others taking longer. Some are inherent urban environmental quality issues and will be managed as time, resources, access and finances allow: Invasive species, litter, etc. More investment needed Framework, alongside other plans, has set how access & open space facilities will be improved over the longer-term. Significant investment / management needed to deliver Water quality actually improving, aside from occasional incidents – these are monitored and well managed Community focus and volunteer activity increased. This has improved some access and environmental quality / safety issues. New weaknesses: Increased access could have a negative impact on some species. There is a lack of 'Gateways' to the River corridor, with associated facilities

Opportunities	
Competitiveness, economy & enterprise	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating quality, accessible greenspaces will improve the quality of life in the surrounding, largely regeneration area - making it a more attractive place to work, live, visit and do business • Economic development potential, for the recreational and tourist industry i.e. fishing on the River Don. • Improving the communities' image and encouraging social enterprise to attracting people and investment to the area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All opportunities still exist. Some can be initiated in the short term. Most will take longer to secure. • SURF Aberdeen, Framework development process and other plans, i.e. Energetica Energy Corridor, has boosted the image and attractiveness of the area for residents and businesses • Strong community involvement and increased local activity, i.e. new development trust • New opportunity: Increased private sector investment from planning gain and opportunities for greenspace economies, i.e. biomass • New opportunity: To create a brand to support unique identity to market the area
Governance	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Links to existing networks and European Union projects • Partnership working - Potential for private and public sector collaborations • Enthusiastic communities within regeneration areas • The project has potential influence of regional / national planning policy • View and promote this fringe as a single resource with a unique identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These opportunities have been exploited: • SURF has linked with other local and regional projects to help deliver / strengthen joint objectives • River Don Communities Network & facebook has been supported network leading to public / private collaborations, i.e. planning, skills development, recreation & arts activities • The Framework has given communities a real chance to positively influence developments in their urban fringe • New opportunity: Creation of / support for district community networks (similar to River Don Communities Network) to direct & deliver improvements

Opportunities	
Spatial planning & stakeholder engagement	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chance to influence urban fringe developments approved in the Local Development Plan - Areas within fringe to be master planned as per national planning policy • LDP guidance to include protection of Green Space Network and buffer strips around watercourses • Links with North East Scotland Structure Plan to promote Sustainable Development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of these opportunities have been exploited. Their success (levels of influence) is yet to be fully tested • The Framework has gone beyond initial plans and is now aspiring to be included as formal guidance in the Local Development Plan. This will have a positive influence on developments in the area up to 2030 • Good opportunities have come out of the framework and ideas from the Network. This has highlighted the potential for the area • There still exists the opportunity to further influence the Structure Plan • New opportunity: To test the Framework model in another area, perhaps forming the basis for an Urban Fringe policy in Aberdeen • New opportunity: Planning gain used to fund improvements
Role & value of green spaces	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve access network to, along and across river for health, leisure, sport & recreation • Enhancing greenspace network connectivity and quality for: leisure, recreation, biodiversity, etc. • Raise environmental awareness; increased opportunities for education and interpretation • Community involvement in the development and maintenance of fringes, i.e. community gardens • Provide information on and off site • Climate change mitigation & adaptation activities • Special designations, i.e. landscape, heritage • Inclusion of more public art 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some opportunities exploited, to a limited degree. Most included in the Framework and other plans. Real change will take many years • Local events have increased, including Health Walks and educational activities based on the environment • An Artist in Residence has been recruited to assist in embedding art / culture / heritage in landscape developments • There remains the opportunity to explore new designations for spaces, i.e. urban greenspace, local nature conservation sites • New opportunity – being exploited: Creating ‘Gateways’ to Don to help with unique branding / identity New opportunity: Potential for phased inclusion of ecosystem services assessment / approach • New opportunity: Greenspace outputs as resources, i.e. biomass

Threats	
Competitiveness, economy & enterprise	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some activities may erode the landscape or create pollution • Potential increase in traffic flow to reach economic activities in urban fringe • Changes in traditional industry – needed different skills base • Lack of investment & state of the economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local landscape value is already low due to now empty former industrial sites. These are planned for redevelopment and this should deliver improvements to spaces & facilities within and around • Sustainable transport networks are being established through Framework and other planning guidance – to mitigate effects of development and encourage modal shifts / health improvement, etc. • State of the economy is potential threat still, but Aberdeen is buoyant despite this. That situation needs to be maintained. Can all the homes planned in the area be filled? • New threat recognised: Existing high quality urban fringe detracting attention and potential to develop the opportunities in this fringe
Governance	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differing objectives for different groups • Urban fringes relate to a wide variety of policy frameworks at regional, national and EU level • Political will. Government and administration changes shifting priorities • Lack of vision / collaboration / understanding of the joint values / potential uses of urban fringes by all parties • Lack of engagement / long-term commitment from any / all 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threats reasonably well overcome • Bringing stakeholders together they have seen commonalities, developed and recorded a joint vision – The River Don Corridor Framework. This is a long term document covering many agendas, providing vision and long-term commitment • New threat: Can the document be a real long-term tool for this fringe? • New threat: Loss of Network, connections and activities following ending of SURF Project. What impact will this have?

Threats	
Spatial planning & stakeholder engagement	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complex nature of the urban fringes in terms of land holdings and fragmented ownership and the implications for overcoming connectivity / access issues • Conflicting land uses vs. multi-functionality • Major developments & infrastructure projects, i.e. residential developments, 3rd Don Crossing • Poor application of developer contributions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These threats still exist • Framework and other guidance should help to overcome land ownership / use conflicts • Speed of the planning process may be an issue for some parties to be able to fully engage, therefore decreasing potential for best results – there is a need for timely submission of planning documentation by all parties • There is still significant development pressure. Required infrastructure must be put in place to support development, including application of developer contributions. While the development framework and guidance exists, this is yet to be tested
Role & value of green spaces	Reflections
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change in land ownership / management • Lack of investment / management • Lack of community identity & engagement – complacency / anti-social behaviour • Concentrations of social & economically excluded groups in urban areas • Health & safety, i.e. good pedestrian routes • Uncontrolled (urban) development • Decreasing / increasing land value, halting or increasing development drive • Litter, flytipping & vandalism • Impact of climate change on greenspaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Threats remain and need constant management • Local Development Plan and associated guidance is attempting to manage development and deliver improved accessibility • Challenge remains with smaller developments with no masterplan • Planning gain, money from new developments, can help to deliver improvements to access and greenspace quality • Environmental quality issues will always exist and need management. New focus to area is helping to improve quality issues • Flooding (climate change) has been included in guidance. Other impacts of climate change on greenspaces are yet to be seen and managed • New threat recognised: Habitat fragmentation – this is being addressed through Green Space Network policy in the Local Development Plan

3. Unlocking the potential of the urban fringe

Aberdeen's approach to the SURF Project was a pragmatic one; we recognised the issues present in Aberdeen's urban fringes and decided this project presented a unique opportunity to help address these. By linking in with, and adding depth and value to, existing strategic planning work in the City we are now better placed to address these issues.

Specifically, Aberdeen City Council was considering new methods to assess the quantity, quality and accessibility of Aberdeen's open spaces and how best to utilise the resulting information for the benefit of the City and its residents. This project allowed us to develop and test new methods and apply their outputs, by working with specific communities and in a specific location – the River Don Corridor. While improving the outcomes for Aberdeen, the work also contributed learning to the wider SURF Project.

The main strands of the project work were defined by the project's objectives, as outlined in the Introduction and given more detail below.



SURF Aberdeen's urban fringe focus area: River Don Corridor, from coast to country.

Objective 1: Develop an accessible Geographical Information Systems (GIS) tool to assist with spatial planning of open space.

Rationale: That the quality of decision / policy / plan making is underpinned by the quality and accessibility of the information that such decisions are based on.

A methodology, the *Open Space Audit*, was developed and used as the main tool by which we assessed the different types of open spaces across Aberdeen, including in our urban fringes and specifically, the SURF Aberdeen project area. In short, this consisted of surveys and analysis of the quantity, quality and accessibility of all publicly accessible open spaces over 0.2 hectares in Aberdeen, not including private gardens or agricultural land. The resulting information was recorded and made accessible via our corporate GIS.

This is the first time an audit of open spaces of this nature and scale had been carried out locally. As such, it was the first time this level of information had been gathered and available in Aberdeen. It has established a valuable baseline that is being used to inform open space policy, planning and management locally, and to help with monitoring the effects of these over time.

Detail on the *Open Space Audit* tool is available in the SURF Project's *Urban Fringe Toolkit*.



Open Space Audit data recorded and accessed via Aberdeen Council's corporate GIS.
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Objective 2: Conduct a participative programme of community engagement activities, using GIS, to improve local decision making.

Rationale: That good quality decision making includes those that will be most affected by the outcomes of the decisions. And, that citizens have the right, and should be empowered to, input to those decisions that most affect them.

We wished to understand how local communities (including landowners and businesses) identify with the River Don and surrounding spaces, to understand what is there now and how it could be improved in the future. We also considered how major developments along the River Don may change the area, exploring ways of linking them into existing open space networks to bring benefits for people and wildlife.

We decided to take several approaches to engaging with our stakeholders, given the rationale above:

Strategic Steering Group

A focused group of ten key stakeholders; local representatives from relevant Council services (i.e. town planning) and statutory bodies (i.e. environmental protection agency). The Group met monthly to help direct the project and monitor progress. Securing high level input from these key stakeholders meant that these organisations took on a real stake in delivering successful outcomes related to this project, while also providing expert direction to it.



Project Steering Group members on a site visit to the Donside

River Don Communities Network

A wider network of invited representatives from stakeholder groups identified as relevant to the project areas and themes. This included representatives from the communities spread across the project area, and representatives from communities of interest, i.e. sporting interests. The Network was established at the start and meetings convened at key stages throughout the project. Network meetings were structured opportunities for two-way communication of concerns, aspirations and to directly influence decisions / plans.

Outreach Sessions

Alongside the Network meetings, further opportunity for participation was offered through specific outreach sessions. A project team member made themselves available to meet with a range stakeholder groups by invite to outline the project and ascertain their hopes, fears and obtain their input.

New Media – Facebook

The general public, and / or those people either less willing or able to participate by the more formal means outlined above, could participate in the ‘conversation’ through the project’s online discussions via [LinkedIn](#) or [Facebook](#). The latter was by far the more successful with approx 150 online members for the SURF Aberdeen Facebook group, sharing pictures, stories and information about the area and making new friendships and collaborations that added benefit to the area.



A screenshot from SURF Aberdeen facebook group page

Day to day

Finally, the everyday forms of communication also formed part of our less formal engagement with stakeholders - face to face meetings, email and telephone conversations.

Engaging and seeking participation through a range of methods and tones (face to face meetings vs online ‘conversations’) has meant we have had a wider reach than many projects. We have taken records of most of these meetings and discussions, have fed back to participants and demonstrated to others what has taken place. We have received overwhelmingly positive feedback about our engagement at all levels and have clearly made stakeholders feel they can have an influence on things that affect them.

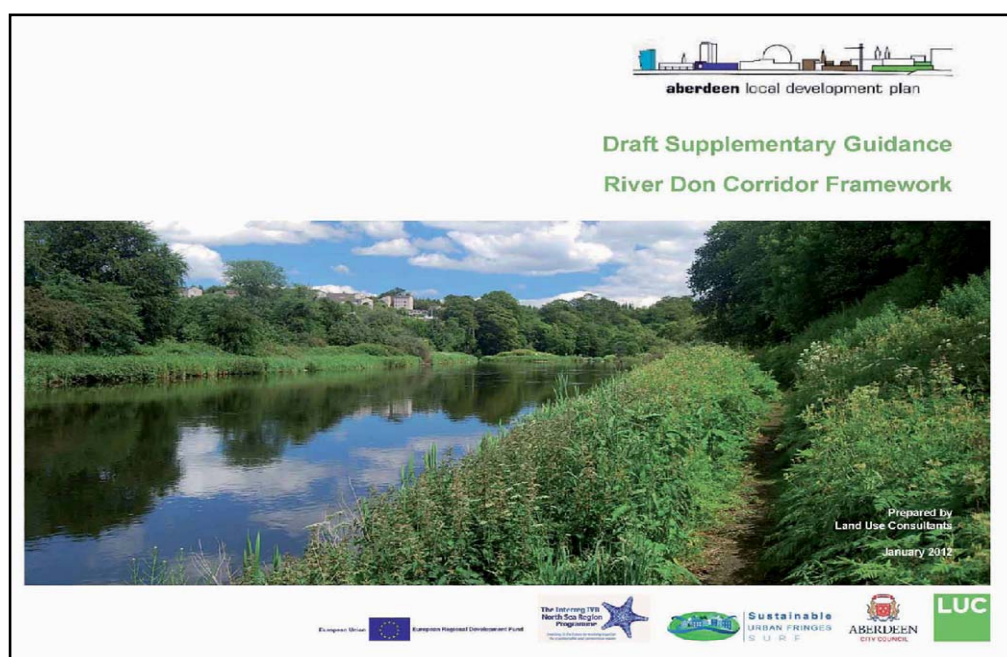
Objective 3: Develop a spatial plan, in collaboration with the community, to guide development & direct improvements to open space.

Rationale: Limited resources from various organisations can be better targeted to deliver more successful outcomes if matters are well considered, planned and recorded.

We recruited external expertise to deliver this objective, due to limited in house resources. Land Use Consultants (LUC) was tasked initially with conducting desk based research & analyses of relevant existing information (e.g. flood maps, woodland inventories, community consultations, etc.) and local to international policy (e.g. Aberdeen's Local Development Plan and associated Policies, Water Framework Directive, etc.). This set the initial parameters of the spatial plan, with the on the ground detail coming through an iterative process of community engagement coupled with spatial plan development.

LUC delivered the formal 'River Don Corridor Framework', following a full statutory public consultation exercise. This Framework set out the Vision, Aims, Objectives and the Spatial Plan for the Corridor. An Implementation Plan will be developed to complement the Framework – identifying how items will be delivered; who will pay, who will deliver and over what time-scales: short, medium and long-term.

This is the first Framework of its type in Aberdeen; setting out the required 'soft' infrastructure associated with City development. Our aspiration is to adopt the Framework and Implementation Plan as formal Planning Guidance for Aberdeen. This would mean that the plan would become one of a set of legal planning documents that developers must consider and integrate into their plans when carrying out any major developments in the project area – many of which are due in the coming years.



River Don Corridor Framework document

Objective 4: Access funding and work with communities to implement several improvements to open spaces in line with the spatial plan.

Rationale: A spatial plan has no real value unless it can be delivered; leaving a tangible legacy. And, a return on investment is a way to empower communities to participate.

We asked the community what they considered as their priorities for delivery, both from the Framework and from the more detailed discussions throughout the participative community engagement programme. We assessed their suggestions and considered which were feasible in line with the resources available; people, time and money. We identified, through this process, a range of short and medium-term items that could be delivered, or scheduled, over the time-scale of this project.

Short-term

Items that were easy to deliver were tackled through two means:

1. Organised and managed community based volunteer events designed to carry out required works. This approach also helped meet several other outcomes, i.e. health, education, participation, etc.
2. Reporting the works required to various organisations / teams to action, i.e. Tree fall obstructions reported to Council's arboriculture team.



Community volunteering event – installing French drains on the Donside paths

Medium-term

Project and funding proposals are being developed in collaboration with various partner organisations. These joint submissions will be used to access the necessary finance to deliver the Medium term items identified as priorities.

Long-term

These items remain incomplete on the Implementation Plan until a time at which they can be delivered – be that through major developments or other means.

4. The Project Teams View

The SURF Project provided Aberdeen the opportunity to advance its understanding and its physical development. It created the space for us to consider different approaches to the development of our urban fringes. It supported us to test and learn from new tools and techniques that seek to improve these approaches. Learning has been an important part of the process. Below, we set out some of our learning and some of the benefits for Aberdeen - from the Project team's perspective:

Change of focus – adapting to changing opportunities

Projects and work streams need to adapt to make the most of changing situations.

All SURF partner projects were aligned to two of the four key SURF Project themes. Each partner was allocated a primary and secondary theme focus. This was in order that the project could advance the learning under their respective themes.

The initial primary theme for the SURF Aberdeen project was Competitiveness, Economy & Enterprise (CE&E). Our secondary theme was Spatial Planning & Stakeholder Engagement (SP&SE). We decided to switch the order of these themes and drop the secondary theme as the project progressed, for a number of reasons:

1. The SP&SE theme was much more aligned with the skills and experience of the selected Aberdeen project team and the objectives of the project. Perhaps this also made it more challenging for economic interests to find their place within it;
2. Aberdeen's new Local Development Plan (LDP) process was under way. The direction of the Plan indicated that the Aberdeen project's focus urban fringe area was likely to be put under significant pressure of development;
3. There was a clear desire to ensure the LDP and associated Planning Guidance was securing better outcomes for open space and the environment; and
4. Another project, [*Energetica: Aberdeen Sustainable Energy Corridor*](#), had a significant focus on the economic future of our project's urban fringe area. We considered it inefficient and probably inappropriate to direct another major project to attempt to meet similar objectives in the same area, at the same time.

All these factors meant that the Aberdeen project was better placed and more suited to engage with the planning and open spaces agenda at that time.

The unexpected – making the most of these new opportunities

Aberdeen City Council has stated that to remain a competitive City, Aberdeen has to offer high quality environments for its residents, businesses and visitors. In relation to item three above, this includes protection and enhancement of open spaces and networks to support environmental protection, health & well-being, sport & recreation, leisure and tourism, sustainable transport, regeneration and quality of life and place.

When the SURF Project came into existence the new LDP process was well underway. The City's planners were open to our agenda and we were able to take an active role in the LDP process. We are now in the position where the City may adopt the spatial plan (Objective 3) for the River Don Corridor as formal Planning Guidance, to support the LDP. When adopted, the spatial plan will act as legal guidance, positively influencing developments in the area for the next 20 years. This is an unexpected positive outcome.

Public engagement – making the most of our strengths

People are entitled to be involved in the decisions that affect them. Good quality public engagement and participation leads to better results. Getting this right is not simple and requires a mix of time, good interpersonal skills and the use of appropriate fora, tools and techniques. This means engagement should be considered and approached with honesty and humility - even when things don't go according to plan.

Approaching this project in this manner (detailed in Objective 2 above) has helped to ensure the inclusion and participation of a wider range of people and organisations. This in turn means the outputs are better directed to deliver improved outcomes for the people they are designed to impact. This approach has also raised the aspirations of local communities and helped them to take more ownership of these outputs, and their outcomes.

Emergence – the added benefit of (social) networks

Emergence is a theory that crosses many disciplines. It relates to the properties that arise from self organised systems. Emergent properties have arisen from the network and social structures (i.e. facebook) initiated by the SURF Aberdeen project. In this case individuals and groups have self organised, beyond the boundary of the SURF Aberdeen project, to share and collaborate on their ideas and share and develop their respective skills and understanding. They have done this not just to benefit themselves, but to benefit each other and people they have never met or communicated with. This has led to increased employment opportunities, a series of public events in the area, and general increased participation in the urban fringe. It would seem that the community is more empowered and engaged in the River Don urban fringe as a result of this Project.

A point to note: Emergent properties can be positive or negative. There always remains the need to set and maintain the framework for honest and constructive collaborations to avoid the emergence of negative properties.

As part of the process we have received a number of stakeholder comments:

Email from Muriel Jaffray, Elected Member for Bridge of Don

"I always believe in giving credit where credit is due! I think you are all doing a grand job on the banks of the river and it is good to see so many different areas taking an interest."

Email from Katherine Maclean, Community Development Officer, Donside

"I wanted to thank you for all the work around River Don project. Our staff had a great day on Tuesday, seeing the area and what it has to offer – and I really appreciate Stephen Bly and his contribution to the success of the day and the success of the consultation day we had in July.

On a more personal note, what I have found is that the walk, images on the website and just the general chat has reminded me about the area, and got me out and about more. I do know the area, though have wandered less over the last few years. The project has opened my eyes and made connections that I had never realised before, it is like it has added a depth to something I knew only superficially.

Thank you to you and your team"

Challenges to delivering real change – the threat that remains

One of the key objectives (Objective 4) of the Aberdeen project was to deliver real physical change to our urban fringe focus area. The EU funding for this project focused on Policy. It did not include funding for physical improvements. As such, we were required to identify other mechanisms for the delivery of the physical aspects of our plans. The challenging state of the public sector finances right across the EU meant we needed to remain vigilant of risks and adapt to changing opportunities. While we acted to identify the mechanisms to deliver the objectives of the River Don Corridor Framework, major streams of funding were withdrawn during the course of the project. It seems that despite the appetite for improvement, money is the limiting factor.

Other thoughts

Projects are about delivering change. It's easy to measure outputs in the timescale of projects. However, outputs are not change in themselves, they are vehicles towards change. It's much harder to measure outcomes (changes), as these tend to become clearer and more measurable after the project period is over. In light of this, we found it imperative that project work must link in with existing policies / strategies / plans or streams of work, in order to deliver real long-term benefits. And to fit in with monitoring and evaluation systems that allow the measuring of these benefits. Measuring the impact of the River Don Corridor Framework will be conducted as part of the 5 year review cycle for the Local Development Plan.

Projects should also seek to advance the status quo. In order to do this, they should attempt new things – something that involves risk. Risk should not be seen as a bad thing. Taking risks leads to new learning. This helps to advance understanding.

The answer to one question inevitably leads to several more. This project work has laid the foundations for furthering our understanding on other issues, for example: the economics of urban fringes, considering social and environmental outcomes / ecosystem services.

Everything is an opportunity! There is simply never enough time to make the most of every opportunity.

To conclude

The SURF Project was very timely, and the themes very fitting, for Aberdeen City and for our specific partner project focus area – the River Don Corridor. The SURF Aberdeen project has benefited from good collaboration between public sector agencies and positive public engagement activities, including input from the private sector. All these factors combined have allowed us to produce good quality outputs which, in part, help to set the framework that, in time, should deliver positive change for the River Don Corridor's environment, its people and the local economy. And, all this supports the successful intellectual and physical development of Aberdeen as a whole.

The Project Steering Group said: "The measures put in place by the SURF Aberdeen project, and its collaboration and complementarities with other streams of work, have ensured that there are now more opportunities than there are threats in the River Don Corridor."