



Development  
Trusts Association  
Scotland



*Case Study Series:*  
**DTAS Deep Dives**  
**KYLE OF SUTHERLAND  
DEVELOPMENT TRUST**

Published February 2025, Research and Insights Team



Development  
Trust

In November 2024, the Research and Insights Team visited Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust to learn more about their ongoing projects, successes and the challenges that come with managing a community anchor organisation in a remote rural area in the North Highlands.

Community ownership, developing existing community assets and creating local employment opportunities have all been key organisational priorities whilst delivering projects to support the Sutherland community.



A quiet space behind the Barn



Community Food Larder



The newly opened Community Kitchen Garden

## Deep Dive Case: Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust

### Background

Remote rural development trusts are finding innovative solutions to tackling the issues facing their communities. Often in areas lacking in an affordable housing market, few well paid employment opportunities and a lack of connectivity to public services, community anchor organisations are playing pivotal roles in addressing these barriers to development and regeneration.

Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust, located in the North Highlands, has for the last 14 years has listened to the concerns of the community and put them into action. The 1991 construction of the Dornoch Bridge meant the A9 was diverted from the villages of Ardgay, Bonar Bridge and Spinningdale, leading to economic decline of the area. Formed by the two community councils of the area, Ardgay & District and Creich, KoSDT was created with an ambition to increase the social, environmental and economic health of the community with a view to increase future long-term resilience and sustainability, with a focus on strategic use of locally available community benefit funds to create long-term impacts.

### Community Ownership and Redevelopment

One of the most significant projects delivered by the community anchor organisation was the redevelopment of the centre of Ardgay village. The development trust sought to breathe new life into the village centre and give its residents a renewed sense of pride. The redevelopment required the acquisition and demolition of a derelict hotel which sat on the site. This has been replaced with a modern business centre called the Barn. KoSDT uses this fantastic building as its office and also rents its premises to four local businesses including a hair salon and an architect practice. The tenants collectively employ eleven staff for their enterprises, illustrating new opportunities from the Barn's additional space. Further, in collaboration with Albyn Housing Association, the first social houses in thirty years were built in Ardgay village, bringing in new residents to the community.

Community asset ownership has proved to be an important priority for the community and the development trust has acted accordingly. When the Bonar Bridge Post Office closed in 2014, community consultations were overwhelmingly supportive of the Trust purchasing the building and keeping the service going. This was made possible thanks to funding from the Scottish Land Fund to buy the property. Since the Post Office reopened, the Postmaster's job has been retained for the local economy with four additional postal delivery jobs also retained in the area. This community

owned asset is believed to be Scotland's only Bike Shop and Post Office, with both businesses in the same premises.

When the well-established restaurant and visitor centre at Shin Falls burnt down in 2013, this had a catastrophic effect on local employment overnight. Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust acted decisively to rebuild the property and successfully received project funding for the project. As part of the Trust's commitment to fostering local engagement, the construction contract required the hiring of a local apprentice. By the end of the project, an impressive £240,000 had been reinvested into the local economy through subcontracts and wages paid to local tradespeople.

In May 2017, the Falls of Shin Visitor Centre reopened to widespread acclaim. Whilst the Visitor Centre was successfully reopened it was forced to close because of restrictions caused by the global pandemic in 2020. Wider economic issues such as higher costs and a fall in post Brexit labour availability led to a situation where KoSDT chose to sell the property in 2023 to a private company. Although this was not the outcome envisioned when the project began, the Falls of Shin Centre remains open and is run by a couple local to the area. The trust recognises its role in boosting the Sutherland economy and bringing the attraction back for visitors and locals to enjoy alike.

Thanks to the investment secured across the years for different projects, Kyle of Sutherland DT has been able to create jobs and livelihoods for residents. Since the development trust was formed, over 40 jobs have been created, employing more than 60 people in that time. KoSDT are passionate about staff development, supporting employees to go onto more senior roles with statutory powers and enterprise agencies whilst giving staff opportunities to learn and improve.

## Current Projects

One of the most recent achievements to note has been the opening of the Community Kitchen Garden in August 2024. Since opening, the Garden has provided a huge selection of seasonal herbs, fruit and vegetables grown in polytunnels and raised beds. With two gardeners in post and lots of volunteers already involved, the garden has become an integral part of the development trust's services. KoSDT have been keen to demonstrate to local parents the benefit of hand-picking produce and then cooking them in the community hall next door. In turn, it is hoped that this knowledge will be transferred into Sutherland households with more home-grown fruits and vegetables contributing to healthier, sustainable lifestyles.

The Community Kitchen Garden are among the initiatives which fall under the Kyle FEEDS project (Food, Exercise, and the Environment, Delivering Sustainability). Led by a Project Manager with two Project Assistants, Kyle FEEDS also delivers regular free exercise classes for residents, distributes food vouchers at local shops and provides a Community Food Larder for donated and surplus food.

The larder building, in turn, has provided a space for residents to connect with others, addressing social isolation as well as food poverty. The local MSP has often used the larder to hold constituent surgeries, illustrating the development trust's role in providing space for the Sutherland community.

## Challenges

KoSDT is not without its challenges to overcome: a lot of current funding for organisations aimed at supporting growth and developing new projects. This comes at the detriment of supporting core organisational costs that are essential for the survival of development trusts. Whilst the trust is fortunate to have access to community benefit funding from a nearby windfarm development, funding is aimed towards new initiatives, creating an arduous task for Kyle of Sutherland to pay operational and administrative costs.

Whilst the community anchor organisation enjoys collaborative partnerships with other local charities, there have been some tensions with other local groups. This has had negative implications for the development trust, making recruiting and retaining staff and volunteers challenging. As a member of DTAS' network working towards Scottish developing and regenerating communities, it is hoped that KoSDT's motivations, activities and ambitions can be better understood in its vision for the Kyle of Sutherland community.

## Future Priorities

Looking ahead, the development trust understands that the correct foundations must be created to develop sustainable communities where young people can comfortably live and work. Like many DTAS members in remote and rural areas, depopulation and a declining working population are the main barriers to community sustainability. The foundations have been identified as providing available and attainable homes, superfast digital connectivity, viable career opportunities, reliable public transport and affordable childcare.

Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust's story illustrates the massive impact of initiatives led by local people. The community anchor organisation has responded to the issues faced by the Sutherland community and has helped to deliver meaningful economic and social change in the area. Resilience and passion for the area have been large drivers for the Trust's successes and with a precise strategy for the next five years, this rural community looks to further thrive and deliver.