

The Winter Gardens: a vision for the future

A report on the past, present, and future importance of the Winter Gardens at Glasgow Green



University
of Glasgow



FRIENDS OF
THE PEOPLE'S PALACE,
& WINTER GARDENS
GLASGOW GREEN



Summary

*'The Winter Gardens are very unique...
It's hard to think of anywhere else like it.'*
Focus group participant

This report details the outcome of a collaboration between **Friends of the People's Palace, Winter Gardens & Glasgow Green (FOPPWGGG)** and a team from the University of Glasgow **Solutions for Change** programme. In the report we share the positive feelings and good memories regarding the Winter Gardens of the past, and the excitement they hold for the future of this iconic civic resource.

Our overarching impression was that there was universal support for the restoration of the Winter Gardens. Focus groups told us not only about memories of the Winter Gardens, and what the Winter Gardens meant to them in the past, but also hopes for the Gardens in the future. Survey respondents detailed ideas for the future make-up of the Winter Gardens as an important civic resource in the city.

A main theme emerged in this work: the Winter Gardens carry great importance for the people who have accessed them, either through past links, or through future aspirations for the space, with hopes that the Winter Gardens would contribute to their communities' development.

The love and enthusiasm we found for the Winter Gardens shows the strong community beliefs that the Gardens should continue as a beloved civic resource for all Glaswegians and visitors to the city.



The FOPPWGGG will use this report as part of their ongoing discussions with Glasgow City Council/Glasgow Life and other partners to show what people would like to see in the restored Winter Gardens.

The Story of Glasgow's Winter Gardens: Past and Present



The Winter Gardens, part of the People's Palace in Glasgow, stand as a testament to the city's cultural heritage. Conceived as a sanctuary for the residents of the crowded and industrial East End, the Winter Gardens and the People's Palace opened in 1898. Designed by City Engineer Alexander B. McDonald, the construction was funded with £18,000 from the Caledonian Railway Company in exchange for permission to build a railway tunnel under Glasgow Green. The architectural design of the Winter Gardens features an expansive steel and glass structure, providing an exotic indoor haven amidst Glasgow's urban environment, at the time filled with a variety of plants.

Initially, the People's Palace housed reading rooms, a museum, and an art gallery, serving as a "palace of pleasure and imagination." Throughout the 20th century, it evolved into a museum dedicated to Glasgow's social history, showcasing the city's development and the lives of its people.

The Winter Gardens offered a peaceful retreat from urban life. Under the stewardship of Elspeth King and Michael Donnelly in the mid-1970s, the People's Palace broadened its focus on social history, gaining an international reputation. Despite their significance, the Winter Gardens faced numerous challenges, including closures for vital repairs. Alterations completed in April 2019 ensured that the People's Palace continued to serve the public. However, the Winter Gardens has remained closed since December 2018, and all of the plants have been destroyed.

In January of this year, Glasgow City Council was successful in securing initial funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund for the restoration of the People's Palace and Winter Gardens. A development phase is currently being undertaken to carry out survey work, design development, and the tender process for specialist glasshouse contractors and services engineers. Once this work is completed, a further bid will be made to the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Challenges Encountered



The Winter Gardens experienced neglect and financial challenges, struggling with closures and maintenance issues, and today lies empty with all plants destroyed.

Current refurbishment plans by Glasgow Life are still unclear. By carrying out the survey FOPPWGGG want to send a clear message to decision makers to make sure that the Winter Gardens are restored as a welcoming social space with plants and tranquillity.

The Winter Gardens were established as a cultural haven for Glasgow's residents. The city greatly benefited from the cultural and recreational space provided by the People's Palace and Winter Gardens. Over the decades, economic challenges affected the maintenance and funding of cultural institutions like the Winter Gardens.

The Gardens experienced neglect and potential demolition, including a closure from 1966 to 1978 due to disrepair and lack of interest from city officials. The Winter Gardens' closure in December 2018 for essential repairs is a recent example of the ongoing struggle to maintain this cultural asset amidst financial constraints. The Winter Gardens did not reopen; only the People's Palace reopened in April 2019 following £350,000 worth of alterations, but substantial financial input remains necessary, and further upgrading is required.

Currently, the Winter Gardens remain closed as part of a major refurbishment project supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund. The project aims to transform the Winter Gardens and the People's Palace into more accessible and dynamic public spaces. However, significant concerns persist within the community about the transparency and execution of this project.

Some community members fear that promised renovations might not materialize or that they might lose free access to these facilities. A lack of communication from authorities has led to doubts about the future use of the space. Additionally, despite assurances that plants from the Winter Gardens would be transferred to other locations, many have observed that **every plant was left to die**, further eroding trust in the project's management.

A note on our methods

Who we are

Solutions for Change is a programme run by the University of Glasgow, matching early career researchers with community groups. The aim is to use our research skills to help our community partner solve a problem.

What we did

To do this, the team helped with the analysis of a survey run by the FOPPWGGG, and also ran two focus groups to identify what different community members thought about the Winter Gardens.

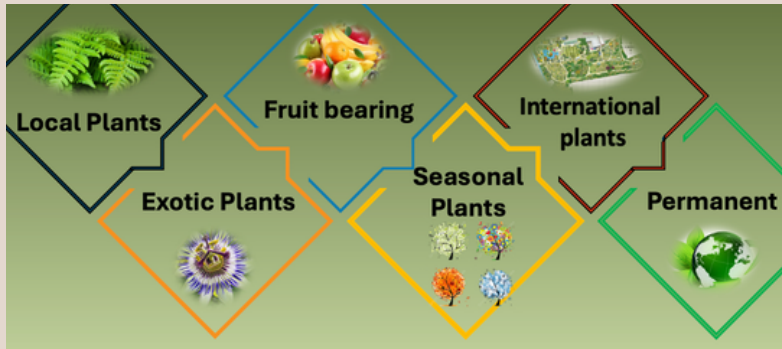
The survey was designed to understand what respondents would like to see in a restored Winter Gardens. Survey data was generated from approximately 350 respondents reached through social media, email groups, and face-to-face discussions. Questions focused on the types of plants and other features respondents would like in the Winter Gardens. Eleven participants were also invited to the University of Glasgow and split across two focus groups. Discussions centred around memories of the Winter Gardens and ideas for their future uses.

Where respondents were from

Responses ranged across a wide number of places within Glasgow, across Scotland, and also internationally, from as far away as Canada. The diagram on the right indicates the postcodes in Glasgow most heavily represented by survey responses. Responses also cross-cut through different sectors in society.



Visions for the Future: what we found



The survey gathered supporters' views on planting and plant-related activities to be included in the restored Winter Gardens. It encompassed questions about plants, water features, learning and education facilities, and glasshouses.

Regarding plants, respondents wanted the Winter Gardens to include a diverse range of plant types, with the most mentioned categories being local flora, exotic species, international varieties, fruit-bearing plants, seasonal plants, and permanent plants.

Local Plants:

Many respondents wanted the collection to reflect the diversity of the city and include Scottish plants, with tropical plants such as palms and Scottish ferns frequently mentioned. Plants were mentioned as a way of reflecting Glasgow's diverse history. One respondent emphasized that the Winter Gardens could

'reflect on Glasgow's colonial history as a way to educate about the troubles of Glasgow's past,'

highlighting the importance of using the gardens as a platform for historical and cultural awareness.

Some respondents envisioned a mix of indigenous plants and ferns to showcase local biodiversity, while one respondent imagined a space filled with

'big leafy plants... the type you feel you can get lost in,'

emphasizing the immersive and enchanting experience such lush greenery could provide.

Exotic Plants: There was significant interest in featuring plants that are unusual for the local climate, including Orchids, Bromeliads, Eucalyptus, and Philodendrons. Additionally, suggestions were made to include highly fragrant plants, intriguing architectural features, vibrant colours, and plants people may not have had opportunities to see before. One respondent expressed a desire for 'exotic and unique plants that you wouldn't typically see outside of a large glasshouse environment,' while another highlighted the appeal of 'rare plants that we would otherwise have little chance of encountering.'

Geographical Variety: Respondents suggested including plants from diverse geographical regions to emphasise global botanical diversity. They highlighted the importance of incorporating species from warmer climates within the Commonwealth to offer a rich, educational experience. Some suggested plants include Bromeliads, Eucalyptus, Philodendrons, and Water Lilies.

Fruit-Bearing Plants: There was significant enthusiasm for including fruit-bearing plants like bananas and tomatoes in the garden. This approach would not only demonstrate sustainable food practices but also provide educational opportunities about plant growth, seasonal cycles, and fruit origins. As one participant highlighted, including these plants would turn the garden into a living classroom, promoting food production awareness and encouraging healthier eating habits.

Permanent Plants: Emphasis was placed on sustainability and raising awareness about climate change. Respondents suggested a traditional fern house and plants demonstrating the impacts of climate change, such as species that will thrive or struggle as the planet warms. The inclusion of endangered plants needing conservation was also recommended.

Seasonal Plants: While specific seasonal plants were not detailed, the general idea was to maintain a variety that thrives in different conditions, providing a dynamic and ever-changing display throughout the year.

There were many other plants mentioned, such as herbs, medicinal plants, and desert plants. However, the aforementioned six categories were the most frequently requested compared to the other categories, which were mentioned only one to five times.



Water Features:

Survey responses indicated that water features are generally seen as enhancing the Winter Gardens' ambiance and offering educational opportunities. Many highlighted the benefits of water elements to provide soothing sounds that contribute to the well-being of visitors. One participant suggested, *'The inclusion of water and its sound really enhances the space,'* while another said, *'I'd like a meandering stream through the plants that incorporates aquatic life and plants.'*

However, careful consideration must be given to their design, maintenance, and environmental impact to meet diverse preferences and ensure sustainability.



Further Opportunities

Learning and education activities

The survey collected respondents' opinions on incorporating horticultural learning and education into the future design of the Winter Gardens. An overwhelming 94% of respondents expressed a desire for such educational elements to be included.

Many respondents emphasized the importance of providing detailed information about the plants, including their origins and uses. One participant suggested,

'I'd like to see LOTS more information about what is planted, where it is from.'

Another highlighted the value of educational programmes for various age groups, expressing enthusiasm for

'schools and for older people's groups. Also botanical art classes for all ages and abilities.'

There was also strong support for sustainable planting education, with one respondent noting the potential benefits of teaching sustainable practices. Partnerships with institutions like Kew Gardens and local universities were suggested to enrich the educational experience. Interactive and accessible educational activities were also recommended, ensuring inclusivity for all abilities. As one respondent pointed out,

'Yes and in plain English though not just aimed at children – a way to provide different levels/depth of info would be great – and accessibility built in through offering multiple formats.'

Overall, respondents believed that incorporating horticultural learning and education could foster a deeper connection with nature and inspire future generations to appreciate and care for plant life.

According to the question about if they would attend **educational classes for gardening and horticultural training** using the Winter Gardens' plant collections, **75%** of respondents said **yes**. Many shared specific preferences and ideas to enhance these classes.

Respondents showed interest in **practical and varied learning** topics. Popular suggestions included **classes on houseplant care, sustainable gardening practices like composting and seed exchanges, and eco-friendly initiatives such as water harvesting and solar panels**. One participant noted,

'Yes please. The only thing keeping my houseplants alive is an app!'

Weekend and weekday evening classes were favoured, catering to different schedules. There was also interest in occasional workshops and one-off events rather than regular classes.

Collaborations with local universities and the public were suggested to enrich the educational offerings and foster community involvement. Additionally, integrating other activities like small musical performances, botanical drawing classes, and winter carolling was recommended to make the Winter Gardens a multifunctional venue.

Interest in attending outdoor growing opportunities was high, as 53% of respondents expressed a positive interest, citing reasons such as benefits to the local community, enjoyment of gardening, and the potential for group projects. Respondents highlighted that such a space could provide a vital community resource.

living, and offer educational opportunities for schools and local groups.

Conversely, around 42% of respondents were not interested. The main reasons for disinterest included personal constraints such as existing gardening spaces at home, physical limitations, and the distance from the Winter Gardens. Some also mentioned a lack of time or personal interest in gardening activities. Despite these personal reservations, several respondents still acknowledged the potential benefits for the broader community.

This diverse range of feedback highlights the importance of considering both enthusiastic respondents and those who may not directly participate but see the value for others.

Additional Features:

Feedback also indicated that additional features are desired for incorporation into the Winter Gardens. Diverse plant zones and educational displays about different habitats and plant adaptations are highly recommended. One respondent highlighted the usefulness of these zones for learning about various environments and adaptations. The inclusion of statues, seating areas, and a café are favoured to enhance visitor comfort and experience, with one respondent noting that 'seats are a must for oldies and nursing mothers.' Art and sculptures, both contemporary and traditional, are suggested.

Overall, respondents prefer a distinctive experience that retains beloved features such as exotic plant collections and historical elements to preserve the Winter Gardens' unique role in Glasgow.

Looking back

History and memory have kept the Winter Gardens alive in the minds of those impacted by them.



Photo kindly provided by Colin Walker from his wedding day 12/6/87

Feedback from both the survey and focus groups highlight themes such as deep connections to the Winter Gardens forged through **weekly childhood visits**, quality time spent with **family and friends**, an **accessible urban green space** for community groups and even a place to get married. The variety of ways that people enjoyed the Winter Gardens underscores their importance as a multi-use space in Glasgow's East End.

'The Winter Gardens were seen as a symbol of the community, representing the collective history and heritage.'

'Restoring the Winter Gardens was viewed as a way to boost civic pride and reinforce the cultural identity of the city.'

Responses to the survey and interview questions also emphasised the essential role the Winter Gardens played in community mental health and well-being, providing stress-relief through access to an outdoor space and for learning about the outdoors. One participant, whose father came to Glasgow after WWI as a Polish Navy veteran, mentioned the essential role played by the Winter Gardens in providing a space of 'sanctuary' in 'the heart of Glasgow.'



Looking ahead

Although the Winter Gardens have great historical significance for the city of Glasgow and its people, they are also an important site of future engagement.

Feedback from the focus groups points to the importance of open spaces filled with lush greenery for promoting **educational activities** about **horticulture, ecology, climate** and **biodiversity** for children and adults.

'If young people are involved in the educational side, it may generate an interest in all sorts of different careers as well as being proud to have something of this nature in your city. Future generations might take more care of the legacy than we did.'

Lifelong learning opportunities at the Winter Gardens can be made available for **children, adults** and **anyone with support needs**. Several participants mentioned the value of a **sensory garden** to benefit community members with dementia and autism.

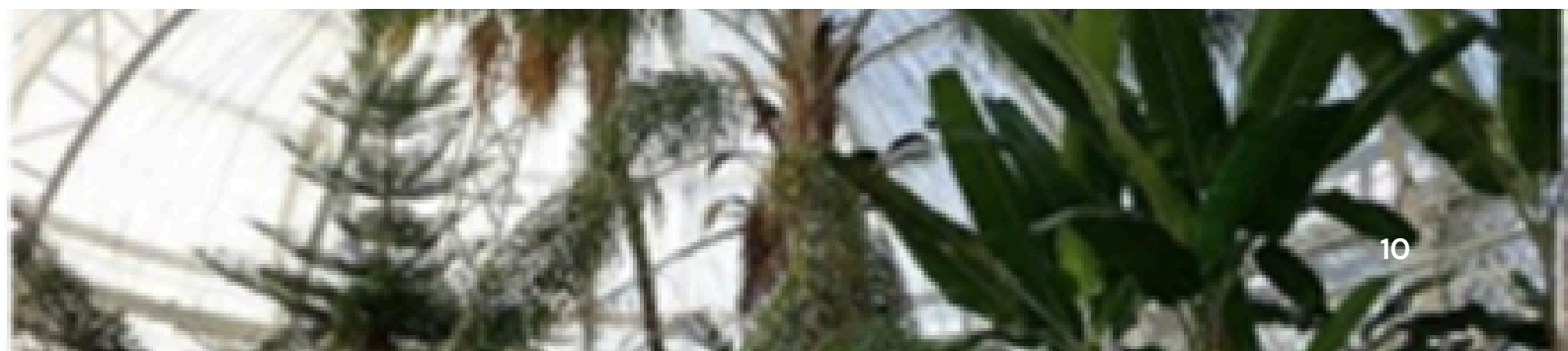
One focus group participant noted that a lack of peaceful places in the community means that she is unable to bring her sister, who is under 65 with dementia, to many public places as they are inappropriate for her, and notes **the importance of creating more spaces like this in the city**.

Further, participants noted that learning opportunities can embrace the **unique flora** of the Winter Gardens to deepen **engagement with environmental issues**.

'Educational opportunities are vital to sustainability and tackling climate change. There should be links made with local schools and community projects [as well as] Glasgow Universities to provide opportunities for research. Talks could also take place at the Winter Gardens making use of a perfect venue for such events.'

Participants emphasised the importance of the Winter Gardens being restored as a **community hub**. Finally, respondents added that they would be happy to have some events being paid while avoiding a **'two-tier system.'** Consensus from interviews is that the community does not want anyone to be excluded, and balancing public and private events upon reopening is critical.

'I think it's really making sure the balance is right because... [it is] not okay excluding people from using [the Winter Gardens].'





Community voices – what our focus groups said

The future and continued legacy of the Winter Gardens also threaded through focus group discussions about community development in the East End.

One participant described the Winter Gardens as an *'epicentre for activity around growing/food.'*

Having a hub in the East End for growing classes, adult learning, children's development, cooking classes, and history classes would bring together community members of all ages. *'The benefits of these classes would help tremendously with health and wellbeing'* in the community.

Another participant added that

'Growing is such a rich and simple way to engage with people and communities to reduce social isolation and learn different cultures through food and plants.'

A balance of public and private events could support the Winter Gardens as an accessible space for community members.

A focus group participant stated that the Winter Gardens

Needs to be kept for the people, as somewhere they can go. [We] don't want to have a two-tiered system where those that can afford to go, go, whilst those that can't, can't.

Another participant suggested that a model for financing the Winter Gardens

could be a pay what you want situation.

This would demonstrate a commitment to ensuring the Winter Gardens remain an accessible space anyone who wishes to enjoy them, regardless of financial background.

The bigger picture

The survey responses and focus groups showed full support for the restoration of the Winter Gardens. The Winter Gardens are vital for our city and biodiversity efforts, crucial for preserving our cultural heritage and contributing to Glasgow's climate goals. The community strongly supports maintaining this cherished green space.

One focus group member highlighted, ***"I feel that for many things become events spaces monetized,"*** expressing frustration with the commercialization and neglect. However, another member conveyed hope: ***"There was hope and optimism about the potential for the Winter Gardens to be restored and revived."***

The Friends of the People's Palace Winter Gardens and Glasgow Green (FOPPWGGG) share many of the same objectives under the recently implemented **Glasgow City Council New Green Deal** that aims to make Glasgow a Net Zero carbon, climate resilient city by 2030. These shared themes of the two organisations include: 1.) ensuring local people have a greater say through inclusive and equitable means about their local green spaces by inspiring and engaging with citizens and businesses; 2.) protecting and promoting green spaces through plant restoration, education, research and innovation and finally, 3.) through preserving and nurturing cultural, heritage and arts sites for public benefit.

Let's make a difference together. Whilst this report will be used in discussions with decision makers to ensure that community voices are heard, this is only the start. Visit FOPPWGGG to see how you can help preserve this important civic resource at <https://www.friendsofppwggg.org.uk/>



Suggestions for the future

Below are the key recommendations for the future vision of the Winter Gardens, based on synthesized survey responses and focus group data:

Link Past, Present, and Future:

Connect the Winter Gardens' history with modern relevance and future aspirations.

Enhance Visitor Experience:

Add facilities like learning and meditation activities to improve visitor experience. Offer educational programmes and workshops to engage the community.

Promote Sustainability:

Use the Winter Gardens as a starting point for promoting sustainability and climate awareness. Showcase sustainable practices and host eco-friendly events and talks.

Preserve Original Features While Adding New Facilities:

Ensure suitability for all age groups and community members. Include sensory gardens and areas familiar to older visitors.

Community and Social Spaces:

Provide inclusive social spaces like cafes, tearooms, and seating areas. Ensure these areas are welcoming and reasonably priced to reduce social isolation.

Aesthetic Enhancements:

Add statues, sculptures, and water features to enhance the gardens' visual appeal. Preserve original architectural elements to maintain its charm.

Memorial and Historical Elements:

Incorporate memorials like the Alex Harvey bust and bench. Honor the Winter Gardens' history and notable figures associated with it.

To obtain a digital version of this report, and for more information please scan the QR code on the right



Acknowledgements

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