



SURF
Scotland's Independent Regeneration Network

SURF : sharing experience : shaping practice



**The Scottish
Government**

Food For Thought



"How can we make more effective early intervention in vulnerable communities to deliver long-term regeneration?"

A report from a SURF 'Food For Thought' event

*In partnership with the Scottish Government's
Scottish Centre for Regeneration (SCR)*

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Background

This 'Food For Thought' lunch event was arranged by [SURF](#), Scotland's independent regeneration network. This event was part of the SURF 'Networking Programme' series of activities across Scotland. This programme is funded by the Scottish Government's [Scottish Centre for Regeneration](#) (SCR).

SURF invited a small cross-sector range of well-placed individuals to this discussion event to explore issues around shared knowledge of early interventions in Scottish community regeneration. It took place on Monday 5th July 2010 in the Scotsman Hotel, Edinburgh.

SURF opened the discussion by informally feeding back some of the relevant messages derived from the Networking Programme. Particular reference was made to outcomes from the recent SURF Open Forum on a similar theme, held in May in Glasgow (see the papers [here](#)). Information from other networks and sources was also cited.

Discussions at this earlier SURF Open Forum (and through SURF's engagement with other networks) generated some core questions that SURF particularly wished to explore at the lunch. These included:

- Open Forum participants identified the need for **early, early**, intervention. Are current statutory triggers for intervention set too late; after the problems and consequences have erupted?
- Is the evidence base in favour of early intervention now sufficiently developed, or does 'the case for' still need to be proven?
- There are considerable challenges of tackling and changing damaging cultures and behaviours in the face of the 'consumer society'. Could improved public policy support in very local community structures, networks and structures become an important tool with which to tackle this?

A summary report follows. No opinion or statement is attributed any individual participant as discussion was on a '[Chatham House Rule](#)' basis. The purpose of this report is to use the outcomes of the discussion to provide informed feedback to the Scottish Government on policy and practice in these issues.

The Need for Early Intervention and the Challenges:

1. Throughout the discussion, participants offered their perspectives on why they felt early intervention is so relevant and appropriate - indeed essential - to policy development in Scotland in the fields of inequality, education and health. Most participants' views were consistent with the outcomes of the Open Forum discussion:
2. Participants agreed, on the need and relevance of early intervention, that:
 - a. Early intervention could be highly effective in addressing the powerful, deep-seated and intergenerational drives of unfair inequality and disadvantage in contemporary Scotland. Underperforming Scottish school leavers were cited as an example of the costs of not intervening
 - b. The history of previous models of intervention is largely perceived to be one of failure. This perceived history and the perceived failure of many, perhaps most, previous intervention models, was argued by some participants to present a renewed opportunity for advocates of new models of early intervention; not least because the resources for the earlier models will now be diminishing
 - c. Early intervention carries a moral imperative, but, for most participants, also a strong economic case. Significant savings accrue to the public and private purses with the avoidance of the need for later, costly, and often ineffective interventions
 - d. There is a consensus that post devolution Scotland has developed a commendable commitment in the fields of unjust inequalities and interventions to address these.
3. Participants also recognised the constraints and difficulties around the development of early intervention:
 - a. There was support from participants for the explicit message in the Scottish Government's *Equally Well* policy framework that effective early intervention means competition for (diminishing) resources from other policy interests. These other interests will, moreover, often have apparently more immediate priority – at least from the perspective of popular public opinion

- b. Meaningful and effective early intervention must by definition be a long term process, perhaps extending across generations. This has to be set against the current policy context. In this context , clear accountability and measurable, short-term impact are seen as priorities
- c. In the contemporary socio economic environment in Scotland, meaningful and effective early intervention would require a profound and sustained change in the cultural mindset of public agencies at all levels, but especially at the more local level.
- d. Policy advisors and practitioners in seeking to develop an early intervention framework must contend with the materialism and individualism of a powerful and pervasive consumer culture across the UK
- e. Issues of third sector organisations undertaking public services roles around early intervention generated different viewpoints. For some participants it was essential that the third sector now stepped in - in some cases to replace the public sector; others doubted the capacity of third sector organisations or the appropriateness of placing such a role upon them
- f. There is an argument for a need to move on from conventional policy models of post-event interventions, and towards earlier-stage interventions
- g. Significant concerns were expressed around impending reductions in public expenditure, coupled with concerns about a pre-occupation with short-term, outcomes-driven targets.

Further Exploration of Themes and Issues at the Food for Thought:

The Need for Early Intervention

- 4. Several participants argued for early intervention as a tool for addressing the need to improve performance and outputs from the Scottish early years educational system.

5. It was argued that by the age of five, children from middle class households arrive at school already able to self-discipline, are able to negotiate confidently with authority figures and in many cases they can count and read. Children from disadvantaged households suffer from a later-development poor start. The disadvantaged children can never catch up, no matter what policies and programmes are put into action; as one participant put it, early intervention is the only way to 'level the playing field'.
6. A recent survey review by the ambitious Glasgow-based GoWell research project on the health impacts of regeneration activity was referred to. It was claimed that this showed a significant lack of informal community infrastructure in Glasgow, with contemporary lives being marked by isolation and huge issues around a lack of intergenerational contact and a lack of role models for young people.

It was argued that a greater level of early intervention could help address these problems. This, for example, might be through the facilitation of contact and mutual support across the generations at very local levels.

7. A related concern identified by another participant concerned the statutory 'triggers' that are currently used in order to measure the need for an early intervention. One participant, arguing from extensive public service experience, asserted that by the time an intervention is triggered, it is by definition a late intervention i.e. it is enacted post event and after the costs and damage have been incurred.

A case in point given was that 90% of street prostitutes in Edinburgh have been through the care system. It was argued that as these triggers are set at too high a level by statutory authorities, when the damage has already occurred.

8. There was a broad consensus among participants that early intervention is currently not 'early' enough.

Views on Current Policy and Practice

9. It was argued that one reason for intervention that is too late may be that there is a wide-spread by out-dated view of a Scotland where:
 - all children grow up in two-parent families
 - both parents are engaged either in paid employment or as full-time parents
 - parents are available and able to provide a high level of stimulation for the child in its early years

It was argued that this clearly no longer applies and that current and future early years policy must reflect current reality.

10. It was also argued that Scotland has developed a strong policy commitment to reduce inequalities since devolution, which is now over ten years ago. One participant with considerable and relevant global experience was of the opinion that Scotland has produced some of the best reports in health in the entire western world. These were viewed as providing a solid evidence base on which to base early intervention
11. Several participants voiced their perceptions of a wider, and unexplained, cultural failure in Scotland to act on what the evidence demonstrated needed to be done. The failure to have made much more progress in developing and implementing early intervention policy and practice was seen by participants as one of the most telling examples of a failure to act on what the evidence, and experience based wisdom, demonstrates as appropriate and necessary.

Participants saw that in Scotland there is a wealth of signposts (i.e. evidence) all highlighting the need for action, but they also saw that there is still a missing link to implementation.

12. One participant called for more ambition in current early intervention policy. It was argued that the Scottish Government use the phrase *Transformational Change* in relevant strategies, but that many of the policy targets set out – e.g. for small percentage increases in breast-feeding rates – are not truly transformational. Indeed, the apparent closing of the gap in some inequities was misleading; for example, with breast feeding it was more a case of middle class mothers giving up, rather than mothers in poorer families practicing more breast-feeding.
13. When discussing the factors that can influence a child's life chances, one participant suggested that the current policy focus on keeping the family together can actually be harmful in some cases. The view was expressed that children who were brought up in a dislocated family environment often had lower life chances than children who were brought up in either a foster home or who were 'looked after' children.

The Impact of the Recession

14. During the course of the exchange, the realities of the current economic situation were referred to frequently as detailed in the following paragraphs.

15. Some participants argued that in order to access funds in a recession it was even more essential to make a business case for your chosen project or policy. It was suggested by one participant that even in a time of recession there was still a very strong business case to be made for early intervention.
16. It was, however, also acknowledged that this is a difficult period in which to try and have funding directed from other programmes to early intervention. This is especially because there has been a perceived 'swing' from priority-drivers and opportunity-drivers to budget-drivers. As a result, making a case for a long term funding package which is unlikely to result in useful outcomes for at least 10 years was identified by more than one participant as being highly problematic.
17. For other participants, recessionary times offered opportunities. The need for demonstrable effectiveness in policy and practice will be increased by value-for-money pressures. This in turn will bear down on models and methodologies that constitute poor returns on investment. Financial stringencies will also compel public service providers to re-evaluate their policies and practices and seek new ways of truly engaging with service users and other stakeholders.

Developing Early Intervention into Prevention

18. Participants proposed that intervention needs to happen at a much earlier age, at which point the policy would be geared to prevent problems - rather than intervene at greater cost and with less success, after problems have occurred. One participant argued that we should move to a scenario where early intervention is, and is known as, 'prevention' rather than early intervention.
19. It was also proposed that this prevention should take place through wider child development programmes and not just in school settings.
20. It was, however, also pointed out that in order to achieve successful prevention, either within or outwith school, there is a requirement for a great deal of resources. As previously mentioned, it is difficult to acquire funding when there are likely to be no tangible outcomes for as long as 20-30 years. One participant felt that this will not fare well against 'reactionary' policy in the current climate, when addressing a topical problem such as large-scale unemployment is likely to offer much quicker results.
21. One participant also argued that often in Scotland early intervention and prevention is talked about a lot, but applied rarely and under appreciated. An example of the UK Government's handling of swine flu was given, in which it was argued that the media criticised perceived governmental exaggerations when it had delivered highly successful preventative measures. This line of

argument was developed to contend that there has to be a cultural shift, to celebrate success in prevention when it occurs.

22. A participant highlighted a preventative study that has been rolled out in North America and Australia. The aim of the study was to build up a useful community development tool to help shape and improve policy at a local level. By requesting the completion of a simple questionnaire filled out on each child while in nursery education, it allows researchers to map the development of child and provide a general overview for the area.

The unique attribute of the study was that the findings were packaged and presented in highly accessible ways directly to the geographical communities affected. Residents were then able to exploit this information in discussion with their schools and local authorities on possible changes or improvements to policy on early years and associated developments. The participant commended the policy for adoption in Scotland.

Community Engagement

23. The topic of the role of the community was a key element of the discussion, both from the point of view of how the community should have a leading role, and how the statutory local authority should respond to this.
24. Some participants felt that it can be easier to implement early intervention projects by empowering communities to take on local responsibilities. Other participants were cautious on what this might mean in practice – experience in the UK and elsewhere had shown that matters of accountability and capacity, as well as resources, were critical to acceptable and progressive outcomes.
25. One participant argued that many individuals and communities in Scotland were willing to take a more active role in local social regeneration, but were being held back due to a lack of realistic opportunities in community empowerment despite 'rhetoric' from local and national bodies claiming the opposite. In most cases, it was added, participation has to be a two-way street and the local authority cannot deliver any meaningful empowerment without active interest from community parties.

This was disputed, with one participant reporting that in their experience there are also communities that are either uninterested in taking additional responsibility, or that clearly perceive the relevant responsibilities to be the sole responsibility of their statutory local authority.

26. Another participant entered this debate to point out that existing local authority power structures can dampen the enthusiasm of communities to take on more

responsibility. This participant suggested that in order to remedy this situation, there is a need for these statutory authorities to give away power to community members, and tap into the potential of the communities' knowledge and commitment.

27. A further opinion expressed was that while there is a need for local authorities to take a step back from statutory power over communities, there is still a need for local authorities to provide support and resources. It was suggested that there is a need to look at how to build capacity in communities to develop suitable structures that the community members can work from. If there is no structure, it was said, it is almost impossible for a community to be able to develop their ventures. It was also pointed out that there would be a need for resources, and not just financial support.
28. Another suggestion was that greater levels of community empowerment could complement existing community planning structures and processes. A good example of community empowerment and participatory decision-making was given in the form of local 'Community Regeneration Forum' structures operated by Dundee City Council.

It was further argued that the need was for adaptability and flexibility; not every community wished to, nor should be expected to, embark on large regeneration or public service delivery projects for themselves.

29. Continuing on this theme, another participant pointed out that there is still a step missing in the current approaches to community and citizen engagement. Citizens can be given information and citizens can be informed, they said, but there is a stage further that needs to be reached in order for people to be genuinely engaged in all aspects of society.
30. A further dimension added to the community engagement aspect by a participant was based on their experience with a national grant awarding intermediary organisation. The suggestion was that there is a 'gap' **between**:
 - small rural communities and small neighbourhood communities in the largest urban conurbations
 - and**
 - Scottish small town communities

The participant's experience was that small rural communities, and small neighbourhood communities in the largest urban conurbations, are typically interested in 'taking the initiative' on matters affecting their communities. The participant suggested that, in contrast, in the smaller towns in Scotland there can be resistance to such initiative-taking.

The further suggestion was that members of communities in small towns tend to see many matters affecting their community as being the responsibility of their local authority, and as a responsibility that should be left with the local authority.

31. As an additional, final point; a participant raised the role of social enterprise, and argued that policy-makers should do more to engage with social enterprises that are operated at a community level where there is a greater understanding of the local issues.

Participant Profiles

- A senior representative of a major city-based housing association that engages in wider role activity.
- A former regeneration practitioner who presently advises local authorities on social policy.
- A qualified accountant responsible for neighbourhood planning, financial inclusion and commercial property within a large housing association.
- An expert with 20 years' experience in the voluntary sector covering areas such as housing, employment, adult guidance, training, social welfare, tribunals, debt counseling, mental health and race equality.
- A senior health academic with a breadth of international experience and author/editor of two books, numerous published reports and many articles in professional, academic and popular publications.
- A policy manager for a local authority intermediary network.
- A qualified town planner currently involved with area regeneration and town centre renewal in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- A senior manager for a partnership that develops research and policy to shape a healthier future for Scotland.
- A director of an umbrella body that supports voluntary organisations and services in a key administrative region in Scotland.
- A project manager from a local authority currently focused on tackling poverty.
- A director of a trust that seeks to develop international partnership-based enterprises.
- A policy manager for a national membership body which supports children and families in Scotland.
- A senior academic and expert in community medicine with a great deal of international experience, currently advising the Scottish Government on health inequalities.

- A Scottish Government civil servant experienced in health inequalities, patient focus and public involvement.
- A Scottish Government civil servant experienced in early year's education.
- A Scottish Government civil servant experienced in housing and regeneration policy and practice.
- A local authority manager with a background in social inclusion and community planning.

SURF and 'Food For Thought'

SURF is Scotland's independent regeneration network, sharing information and promoting discussion so as to help shape policy, opinion and the delivery of successful regeneration efforts in Scotland.

We do this through organising conferences, seminars, international policy exchanges and lectures; by publishing documents such as the quarterly Scotregen journal, as well as reports and briefing notes; through organising an annual awards scheme; and by working closely with key policy-makers.

We also organise 'Food For Thought' events, to which we invite a range of relevant figures to discuss a topic of mutual interest in a discreet and informal setting.

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