



**SURF**  
Scotland's Independent Regeneration Network

SURF : sharing experience : shaping practice



## **Alliance for Action Learning Events FOOD IN THE COMMUNITY Autumn - 2015**

In 2015, SURF's Alliance for Action held shared learning sessions for cross-sector partners and people living and working in the communities of Govan, Glasgow and the Gallatown, Kirkcaldy. The background, programmes and joint learning from the events can be accessed on SURF's website ([www.scotregen.co.uk](http://www.scotregen.co.uk)). This paper reports additional learning on the subject of Food in the Community.

### **CONTEXT AND FOCUS**

**Food in the Community:** the role of food in local and national regeneration policy and practice.

**Food** – its production, use and distribution – is a key component in supporting the health and wellbeing of a community.

The Scottish Government Food Commission had been set up in 2015 in response to the 2014 public consultation which identified that reducing food poverty had become a major priority across social justice organisations.

The Alliance for Action found that at a time when welfare sanctions and the proliferation of foodbanks were limiting nutrition choices to meeting basic fuel needs, there were a growing number of active citizens learning to grow, cook and distribute food and share their skills and knowledge. In both Govan, Glasgow, and East Kirkcaldy, Fife, there were several emergent groups which were taking ownership of the kind of food produced, cooked and eaten in their communities. These food-related initiatives were providing opportunities for people to come together and enjoy a shared positive experience - as well as directly impacting on diet and health. In the Gallatown food had successfully been used as a way of engaging with and supporting poor families through a community café, cooking classes and the distribution of soup packs to parents at the school gate. In Govan, Children in Scotland had been working with Govan Housing Association and local schools to find ways of using food as a catalyst for engaging with

and supporting families. The Govan and Craigton Integration Network had found that food was an effective way of initiating and cementing relationships between diverse groups.

## PURPOSE

- To showcase different approaches and experiences in using food to support greater community participation and cohesion in the regeneration of the different Alliance for Action contexts of Govan and East Kirkcaldy;
- To create a constructive context for shared learning and cooperation across:
  - People and organisations from Alliance for Action areas involved in directly supporting or participating in relevant community initiatives.
  - Representatives of relevant local and national support bodies
  - Relevant policy influences and funders
- To explore existing and potential collaboration among existing initiatives in practical regeneration efforts.
- To facilitate shared learning and enhance cross sector understanding and support for the role of creativity and food - its production, use and distribution - in local and national regeneration policy and practice.

## PROCESS

In keeping with the theme, this event was catered for by local social enterprise Soul Food Sisters Collective and held at the Kinning Park Complex where a community café had been recently set-up. The designated speakers discussed the challenges and realities of: setting up a new initiative; developing and sustaining existing projects; the central role played by food in breaking down barriers and forging connections within a potentially divided community; and the wider policy implications thereof. A general lunch-time discussion reflected on potential collaborative connections and ways in which learning could inform the shape of broader national resources and policy decisions.

## LEARNING

- **The promotion of healthier eating is only a small part of the benefits that accrue from community food initiatives.**  
Growing food, sharing food preparation and eating meals together, whether in a learning environment or at a community café can:
  - Break down barriers between diverse groups.
  - Act as a common language between those with no other easy means of communicating with each other. This is equally applicable to different generations as it is to those who may use different languages.
  - Allow participants to feel useful and valued.

- Provide opportunities for newcomers to share their culture with the host community.
- Reduces social isolation
- Support community cohesion
- Provide a springboard for further building of community engagement.

*“The weekly meal gives you a reason to get out the house.”*

*“Everything we do at the community centre comes back to food”*

*“Old people and the other users [of the community centre] used to stick to their own activities and their own space. Now everyone talks to each other”.*

*“Food is central to all our events. Our volunteers and service users do all the preparation and feel they are giving something back to the community”*

*“If your status prevents you from seeking paid employment, then working with food lets you utilise skills, provides a sense of pride.”*

*“Our service users [asylum seekers] often bring food from their home countries as gifts - we feel guilty about taking something when they are so poor, but know this is their way of showing appreciation”.*

- **Promoting food initiatives and healthy eating is not necessarily about more money, more resources. There are existing resources in most communities which are underused.**
  - Training kitchens may be the holy grail for teaching food skills but realistically they are usually only available to support people into employment.
  - Communities should have access to schools – and their kitchens - outwith normal school hours.
  - **Some food initiatives don’t need cooking facilities at all.** Groups can meet and prepare food and take it to their homes to cook.
  - School and community gardens are underused. Most communities have unused/undeveloped areas of land. They should be available for everyone to develop – not just a select few who have claimed ‘ownership’ of a community resource. The issue of land ownership is inextricably entwined with the current debate on community empowerment.
- **Initial investment to ‘test the water’ can be very small**
  - One successful cooking class - now almost self-sufficient after three years – began with a scone-making contest,
- **Collecting subsidised or free food doesn’t have to be a humiliating or shameful experience**
  - There were many concerns about food banks; about the ‘demeaning’ process of using them; the limited range and poor nutritional quality of the food

- offered and about their 'sticking plaster' status - unable to address the real problems which have created food poverty.
  - Free food packs can be distributed in a way which brings the beneficiaries together, sharing their problems and reducing the feeling that their poverty is isolating.
  - The distribution of £1 soup packs at school gates (enough basic soup ingredients and a recipe for a family meal) engages families who may be hard to reach by other means
  - Radical employability organisations like Galgael, or refugee support groups like the Govan and Craigton Integration Network offer the opportunity to prepare and enjoy free meals as part of broader programmes.
  - Community cafes are promoted as social occasions, but provide regular healthy meals for as little as £1.
- **Successful food initiatives cannot be imposed on a community by outside agencies**
    - Food is as much about cultural differences as it is about calorie or sugar content
    - You cannot impose 'middle class' ideas of what constitutes 'healthy food'
    - Labelling a food learning class 'healthy eating' can kill it stone dead before it starts.
    - Poor communities can have as much interest in the sophisticated menus promoted on cookery television programmes as any other community
- **Promoting healthy food in Scotland - particularly as a way of addressing inequalities - cuts across Government Directorate and local authority departments.**
    - Planning permission and commercial property rates impact on land use and the growth or reduction of the number of supermarkets
    - Children should be taught about food production, distribution and their nutritional needs across the curriculum.
    - Public buildings such as schools and hospitals should be promoting more food that is healthy and locally sourced.

## CONCLUSION

SURF's role through the Alliance for Action has been to facilitate the sessions in a way which creates an atmosphere of sufficient trust for participants to engage in lively and informed debate. Feedback from this event was very positive.

Participants described the session as valuable and educational. One volunteer said he was now able to view the contributions he made to his local community café in a much broader context.

*"What I'm doing seems more important now. It's not just about the cooking and the chat"*

Useful connections were made between those who were growing, distributing and preparing food and some participants planned follow-up meetings to discuss ways of using each other's skills and projects to support each other. One project worker is in the process of introducing his own version of the Gallatown soup pack scheme in Glasgow.

Similarly, funders and policy makers were given the opportunity to meet and connect and learn from those whose lives are impacted upon by their decisions.

As well as the event learning being used to inform the broader Alliance for Action work, learning from these sessions has also helped to inform the broad-based 18 months of research which produced SURF's 2016 Manifesto for Community Regeneration<sup>1</sup>.

This report focused on the shared learning from Food in the Community Event. Learning from other events and can be accessed through the SURF website. (*details below*)

*For more on SURF and its work, please visit the SURF website: [www.scotregen.co.uk](http://www.scotregen.co.uk).*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.scotregen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/SURF-2016-Manifesto-Final-Draft.pdf>