



Thursday 23 August, COSLA Conference Centre, Edinburgh

This paper sets out to provide background on some of the realities of community regeneration, as experienced through SURF's work, including the *Alliance for Action* programme. The themes identified are intended to provoke debate in the context of SURF's Annual Conference, 2018.

1 People, Places and Policy

Most of SURF's learning about the realities of community-led regeneration comes from the very best informed of experts – those who live and work in Scotland's poorest communities. For the last 26 years, in our role as Scotland's regeneration forum, we have benefited from a broad engagement with a network of some 3000 individuals actively involved in various aspects of regeneration.

Additionally over the past 20 years SURF has engaged with specific projects through the annual SURF Awards which recognise and promote examples of best practice and innovation in community regeneration. Through the awards process, thousands of individuals have gone on to participate in our popular shared learning workshops, which are held throughout the year.

Most recently, our place based, *Alliance for Action* programme has made it possible for us to work closely with those living in and involved with real place based regeneration challenges, including some of the country's poorest communities. Since 2013, SURF's *Alliance for Action* focus has expanded from its original two sites to five communities: Govan, Glasgow; East Kirkcaldy, Fife; Rothesay on Bute; Dunoon, Cowal; and Langholm, Dumfries and Galloway.

Scottish Government's focus on empowering communities, is, rightly we believe, welcomed by most of those working and living in poor communities. The most successful regeneration approach is community initiated and led, but even the most generously funded and best intentioned of policies will struggle to succeed without understanding the reality of the barriers to be overcome.

Our understanding of community realities is based on observation, analysis and experience through SURF's diverse networks. For the purposes of this conference we are focusing on four issues which best reflect our experience-based learning across different communities.

- Essential Services
- Fear and Trust
- Power and Stigma
- Shared Success.

Essential Services

While an increasing number of agencies (including SURF) advocate the potential benefits of financial initiatives, such as some form of Universal Basic Income, having less money is not the only form of disadvantage disabling those in Scotland's poorest communities.

Beyond the bald facts of shorter lives, worse mental and physical health, reduced educational attainments and fewer employment opportunities, there is evidence that services that are understood to be universal, are not always delivered to the same standard.¹ Public service providers respond to middle class queries with more prompt and positive responses than to those from disadvantaged areas. There is a perception and some anecdotal evidence that police, fire and ambulance services respond differently to emergency calls from poorer areas and to the kind of emergencies more common in disadvantaged communities. There is also a perception that police have different responses to the same type of crime, depending on its location.

Austerity-driven cuts in services disproportionately impact on the lives of poor people and places. They are most heavily reliant upon local provision of social work, housing officers, public transport and advice services. They are additionally less likely to have access to private transport to ameliorate the effect of closed post offices, job centres and centralised medical services. To return to the question of income, and notwithstanding arguments about the adequacy or otherwise of current levels of available benefits, the present method of delivery of DWP services is in itself a source of damaging stress. Participants in our most recent *Alliance for Action* Shared Learning

¹ Hastings, A. and Matthew, P., 2011, *Sharp Elbows: Do the Middle Classes have Advantage in Public Service Provision and if so how?*, Glasgow: University of Glasgow <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/57021/1/57021.pdf>

Session cited scores of examples of ways in which red tape and bureaucracy derails any possibility of income security income and has an additionally negative impact on community led regeneration. ²

Fear and Trust

Communities are rarely cohesive networks of similarly minded, benign individuals with a shared vision of their future.

Disadvantaged communities are often – and with good cause - divided, angry and mistrustful of each other and outside agencies. There are often historic grievances between different factions and when it comes to trusting those from outside, people have developed a healthy scepticism about those professionals whose own continued employment depends upon cooperation from, and the needs of, the community.

Income insecurity brings its own issues of mistrust.

“If people have little to lose then they’re easy meat for criminals.”

Community participant at *Alliance for Action* shared learning event, April, 2018.

In practical terms, desperate people may turn to money lenders to get them through a crisis. High interest repayments spiral and families end up in debt with all the consequences that result. One of those consequences may be an increase in criminal activity. Financial insecurity undermines self-worth, self-respect, and any sense of having control of your life. The stress, anxiety and frustration which can result, leads to a high incidence of ‘self-medication’ through drink and drugs. The involvement of family or neighbours in illegal activities provides a further reason for the erosion of trust in any agency that can be seen to represent external authority.

Anyone who has been involved in participatory budgeting (PB) activities will recognise that a common response to PB overtures is disbelief on the part of the community that they will genuinely be allowed to choose who or what receives the money on offer. This lack of trust is sometimes similarly reflected by the attitude of some funders, who aren’t convinced that a community can be trusted to make the ‘right’ choice.

The issue of trust impacts on external investment in an additional way. SURF’s experience has been that remote investors who lack local knowledge may only fund readily measurable outputs of specific activities and numbers rather being able to trust in and support more integrated, softer outputs. While recognising the need to demonstrate value, there is frustration among local people and organisations that they are not more often trusted to make their own well informed local decisions.

Power and Stigma

Despite the difficult realities experienced by many poor communities, we know that it is still possible for people living and working in desperate situations to turn individual lives around and for communities to recover a positive direction. With trust and transparency; with the energy and commitment of individuals, families and groups; and with proper support and resources; extraordinary results have been produced against considerable odds.

But the reality is that too many poor communities are increasingly vulnerable to forces beyond their control. Global economic upheavals, global warming, national and international investment decisions, changes in national transport or policing policy – all of these and more can and do undermine the most determined local collaborations.

^{2 2} [Shared Learning Report on Red Tape and Benefits](#)

Further damaging to any attempts to empower communities and to encourage a sense of pride and autonomy, are the stigmatising public perceptions of poverty, as encouraged by media outlets like the *Daily Mail* or the Channel 4 television series *Benefits Street*. Community participants at a recent *Alliance for Action* shared learning event expressed their frustration and anger at the continual presentation of those on benefits as always lazy, criminal and/or undeserving.

Shared Success

Despite the extra burdens imposed on poorer communities, including those identified above, there are nonetheless many successful examples of the full potential of local assets and aspiration being achieved.

Collaboration – especially when facilitated by an informed, but objective, outside agency like SURF - makes a real difference. The *Alliance for Action* has been successful in finding and forging key links within and outwith communities which produce mutual benefits for everyone involved. By encouraging and supporting, sometimes previously disparate, groups to collaborate, alliances can replace competition; more respectful partnerships reduce waste and duplication; and funding and other investments can be better targeted to meet actual, rather than perceived needs.

Creative approaches to regeneration have produced demonstrable improvements in *Alliance for Action* sites and across Scotland. Communities have used creative approaches to: explore their own place history and heritage; to improve the physical appearance of places; to forge intergenerational connections; to improve their own health and wellbeing; to increase a sense of autonomy; to support enterprise; and to inspire a sense of collective ownership of a community history and heritage.

Communities are often rich in underexploited reservoirs of energy, knowledge and ingenuity. Individuals and groups step up to take advantage of accessible opportunities that are offered and can create new positive forces for good out of the worst of circumstances. For example, at a time when **welfare sanctions and the proliferation of food banks** are reducing nutritional choices for those struggling to meet basic needs, a growing number of active citizens have responded by learning to grow, cook and distribute food and share their skills and knowledge. While recognising that no-one should be going hungry in a country as prosperous as Scotland, food-related initiatives are providing opportunities for people to come together and enjoy positive shared experiences, initiating and cementing relationships between diverse groups as well as directly impacting on diet, health and wellbeing.³

The exploration of **history and heritage**, while also demonstrably increasing wellbeing and a sense of community ownership, has additionally been shown to produce important economic benefits.⁴ As well as providing physical resources for community use, refurbished and renovated buildings and sites attract investment by producing contemporary work places and creative spaces. The promotion of heritage trails and historic buildings additionally attract visitors and investment, generating direct and indirect income.

³ Scottish Government is currently supporting many of these initiatives through the £1.5 million Fair Food Fund, which supports projects that help people move away from emergency food provision and access healthy, nutritious food through community based activities and support.

⁴ [Learning from SURF Heritage Event](#)

The lived experience of participants in last year's *Alliance for Action* shared learning event on Heritage reflected the findings of national research and foundations of Scottish Government policy⁵ that heritage-based regeneration impacts positively on local economies.⁶ Participants also spoke about the way in which heritage-based regeneration creates jobs around the tourism and heritage 'industry' – including the need for training and upgrading skills connected with the traditional construction sector; those needed for visitor interaction and those employed to promote and maintain sites and buildings.

Further debate on these issues and others, during the course of the conference, will inform SURF's continuing work in supporting and connecting the benefits of community led regeneration.

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Supported by: Aberdeen City Council, City of Edinburgh Council, Clyde Gateway, Creative Scotland, Dundee Partnership, Glasgow City Council, Heritage Lottery Fund, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, the Scottish Government, Skills Development Scotland and Wheatley Group.

⁵ Reeve, A and R. Shipley, *Heritage –based regeneration in an age of austerity: Lessons from the Townscape Heritage Initiative*, [Journal of Urban Regeneration & Renewal](https://www.hlf.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/hlf-puts-heritage-heart-regeneration-scotland-%C2%A37m-investment), Volume 7 / Number 2 / Winter, 2013-14, pp. 122-135(14). See also: <https://www.hlf.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/hlf-puts-heritage-heart-regeneration-scotland-%C2%A37m-investment> and *Our Place In Time*, The Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland (2016) <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0044/00445046.pdf>

⁶ <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/heritage-counts/> , <https://www.hlf.org.uk/new-ideas-need-old-buildings>