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Scotland's Independent Regeneration Network

SURF : sharing experience : shaping practice



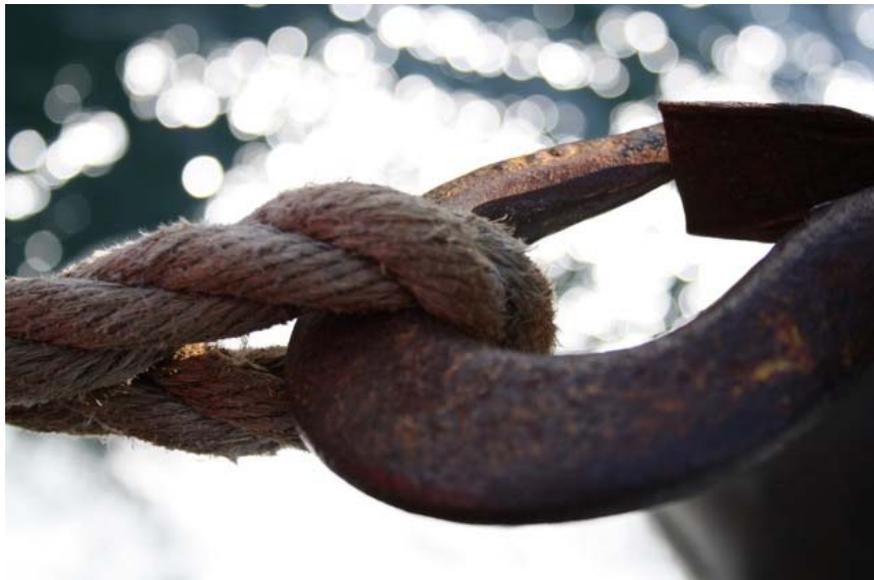
JOSEPH ROWNTREE
FOUNDATION



The Scottish
Government

Regeneration in a Recession: REALITY, RESOURCES AND RESILIENCE

A collaborative programme of activities between SURF and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), with support from the Scottish Government



A summary of a SURF 'Food For Thought' discussion 15.12.11

This **summary paper** presents some of the main outcomes from a SURF 'Food For Thought' discussion event with senior regeneration figures on the above theme. The event, part of a collaborative programme, was held on 15 December 2011 in the Grand Central Hotel, Glasgow.

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1 Some background on the SURF/JRF collaborative programme

SURF is undertaking a programme of collaborative work with the JRF to examine the 'Reality, Resources and Resilience' in Scottish communities under the impact of recent recession-related policy decisions at local and national level. This process is being supported by the Scottish Government

The first phase of work comprised two case studies. One the city based community of **east Govan** in Glasgow and the other the smaller town setting of the **Gallatown** neighbourhood of Kirkcaldy, Fife. The aim is to learn more about specific circumstances, linkages and changes and to deepen understanding of the effects of public and private spending reductions.

The main focus has been on the lived experience and perspectives of residents, businesses, voluntary sector support bodies and public sector service organisations. This qualitative investigative work is being supplemented with the gathering of some relevant background statistical information.

2 Background to the 'Food For Thought' discussion

A participative seminar was held in November 2011 to explore the resonance of the emerging case study themes in other communities throughout Scotland. That event included a presentation of some of the key messages arising from discussions in the two case study areas, with local participants elaborating on the key points from their particular experience and perspective.

The 50 cross-sector guests in attendance then formed smaller groups to discuss similarities and differences in their own experiences across Scotland. Feedback on the agreed key issues formed the basis of a concluding plenary open discussion panel session. This resulted in narrowing the focus further down to two main points, as set out in section three of this paper.

The purpose of the follow-up SURF Food For Thought (FFT) was to enable the further exploration of these central points, and the implications for future community regeneration policy and practice, with relevant policy-makers and key players.

Participants included experienced representatives from national and local government, health and employability agencies, academic institutions, community groups, funding organisations and national voluntary bodies. The FFT was held under the Chatham House Rule to encourage frank and open debate.

3 Agreed themes emerging form the first phase

As stated above, the first phase of the programme focused on the impact of recession-based policy decisions for disadvantaged communities in Scotland. Following presentations, discussion and voting at the seminar on 15 November 2011 in Glasgow, the following two prioritised areas of concern were agreed upon:

1. **Small Cuts:** The disproportionately negative impact of relatively small, short-term savings achieved through reductions in local physical maintenance regimes and cuts in grants/delivery contracts to community groups
2. **Blocked Systems:** The far-reaching and locally corrosive problems arising from stymied opportunities in employment, education and housing

These two central issues are expanded upon in the Appendix on page 11.

4 Intended purpose of the FFT discussion

The main objectives of the Food For Thought discussion were:

- To link current local knowledge and experience into emerging policy and practice considerations
- To draw out opportunities for practical improvements in policy and practice in the changing national and local contexts

- To inform the further stages of this collaborative process
- To build understanding and enhanced cooperation by networking different players and organisations in an informal and constructive context.

5 Summary of discussion

The following section is intended to collate and summarise the key points of the varied discussion. It therefore reflects occasionally contested views emerging from extensive and inclusive exchanges.

5.1 Realities and perceptions in local authority cuts and efficiencies

- 5.1.1 In taking the debate forward across different sectors there is a problem of definition – when is a cut a cut, rather than an efficiency? Different service delivery approaches can result in improvements and budget reductions simultaneously; cuts aren't always in reaction to financial pressures and don't always reduce service outcomes.
- 5.1.2 Cuts are generally experienced by communities as having something taken away, as opposed to having something done differently. Striving for an open and constructive 'cuts versus changes' discussion between service providers and neighbourhood representatives is essential.
- 5.1.3 Generally, social work and education budgets are protected, so other council departments face larger percentage cuts across the board. However, only 40-45% of the public resources spent on disadvantaged communities come from the local authority. Other Community Planning partners, Further Education establishments, third sector organisations and others are also feeling the impact and making cuts in services. Who is actually doing the cutting makes little difference to the communities that suffer the loss.
- 5.1.4 The arbitrary application of small cuts applied equally to different areas is generally ill-thought out and ineffective, resulting in inefficiency, untimely disruption and loss of key services/personnel. The process tends to foster a departmental 'protection' mentality which reduces potential cross-service cooperation. Top-slicing, and just waiting to see what happens, is also wasteful economically.
- 5.1.5 Some of our most neglected communities aren't affected by support grant cuts, because local community groups never received any funding in the first place.

- 5.1.6 Are local authorities genuinely willing to let communities in on hard choices? If they do, they might be surprised at the creative solutions that can arise from more open conversations. Similarly, well-intentioned internal discussions should be discussed with the relevant community to help ensure they meet local authority expectations of reality once they are enacted in the community.
- 5.1.7 This is rarely easy, but where there are real difficulties, mediation, conflict resolution and peer-led coaching models can be cost-effective methods of alleviating tensions between community and local authority and moving forward on shared understandings.
- 5.1.8 Significant sections of the voluntary sector are highly reliant on public sector support funding, and get completely destabilised by even the smallest cuts that are passed on from local authorities. An example given was a popular community lunch club that relied on just £500 a year from the local authority to provide a valuable social network for some of the most vulnerable community members. The preventative spend benefits were relatively enormous but nonetheless subsequently lost.

5.2 Empowerment and assets – extraordinary consensus but a lack of action

- 5.2.1 Empowerment should be seen as a priority – not just a welcome rhetorical development. Empowerment often starts with access to information - How, where, why and on what information are decisions being made? - This is a recurring question in conversations around supporting more community empowerment.
- 5.2.2 Owning assets can be hugely empowering for a community, both in developing experience and managerial capacity as well as in generating revenue and delivering vital local services. More needs to be done by agencies to work ‘with’ rather than ‘for’ communities in asset-based approaches. The best form of capacity building is carried out by community members themselves.
- 5.2.3 All major players now seem to be enthusiastic about communities owning assets, but this has not yet been matched by action. This is probably because:

Current asset holders, in general, lack trust in community and voluntary sector organisations and fear the consequences of failure – not least in media coverage.

In reality, community and voluntary groups are not always efficient, reliable and competent (but neither are all private sector organisations that are more routinely invested in).

Community Planning Partnerships, and other strategic structures, can prove to be systemically ineffective at realising appetites for empowerment at a local level.

- 5.2.4 Overall, the Scottish Government could do more to help communities take on unused/under-used public assets and vacant land/property. A focus on physical asset ownership is not always the most helpful one – the health and wellbeing of local residents should be the top priority.

5.3 Public services versus support for economic development

- 5.3.1 It is feasible to reduce expenditure in public services in order to increase investment in social and economic development. This would be highly controversial, but could result in more success in meeting widely valuable regeneration outcomes such as reducing unemployment. For example, removing a primary school from a community would free up a great deal of public resources for use elsewhere but the impact would be considerable; indeed, such a move could be considered a 'death knell' for some communities, especially in rural situations.
- 5.3.2 Recent history tells us that economic growth offers little improvement for disadvantaged communities. Provision of good public services, especially health and education, is much more important in improving the lives of people in disadvantaged areas.
- 5.3.3 Public services are generally designed with convenience for delivery agencies in mind, rather than communities. A change in thinking on organisation and delivery, rather than reduction, could lead to their ability to improve outcomes for the community.
- 5.3.4 Local people should be more involved with service delivery – not just community representatives, but locally based staff as well. Too often, diktats rather than guidelines or flexible frameworks are issued across a whole region. These normally don't take different community level needs into account. Crucially, they also fail to access and build on the knowledge and public contact role of front line staff. The perception of local problems and potential solutions by operational staff working in disadvantaged communities are often different to those working in strategic policy areas.

5.4 Potential transfer of power to community leaders & local anchor organisations

- 5.4.1 In some communities, it is possible that effective local leaders will have little formal education, a bad credit record and an entrenched suspicion of government bureaucrats. It seems unrealistic to expect these groups of people to independently develop conventionally acceptable business plans, especially ones that can stand up in the current economic climate – particularly since nation states and EU bureaucrats presently struggle to do so.
- 5.4.2 The recession has contributed to councils generally becoming more centralised, and taking a ‘one size fits all’ approach across disparate neighbourhoods in the region in an attempt to manage costs. This is regressive in terms of aspirations for a wide range of community development areas, including capacity building.
- 5.4.3 We have yet to adequately address the role of local elected council members, and how can they best liaise with non statutory community representatives. There are progressive possibilities but where they still view themselves as the ‘chief’ activist for ‘their’ community, destructive and protracted hostility can result.
- 5.4.4 More support could come from local academic institutions to enable community volunteers to develop local capacity, information and resources as well as working towards formalised community development qualifications in some instances. There are significant benefits for the institutions where this already happens. However, pressures on academic funding mechanisms are a major impediment to the maintenance and further development of such collaborative initiatives.
- 5.4.5 National and local government is bureaucratic by nature with a default focus on tangible, measurable and preferably physical outcomes. This is one reason it struggles to work effectively with non-professional community members and less definable personal/social development dynamics. The fact that there are still struggling areas suffering from a lack of community participation despite decades of policy and practice developments is a major cause of concern.
- 5.4.6 Local individuals do not always offer the best route for change. Some are ‘gatekeepers’ with a narrow focus of interest, rather than knowledge or concern for what is best for the whole community. As such they can act as a blockage to positive changes and varied engagement strategies. Other partners should take account of this instead of maintaining the position of gatekeepers via routine, tokenistic community engagement approaches.
- 5.4.7 Community groups comprise a mix of volunteers, some highly active and responsive, others less involved. Frequent change is not uncommon as members

lose interest or are unable to continue to participate because of changes to their employment or domestic situations. Managing the impacts of this natural disruption is a continuing challenge which requires a dedicated resources and skills.

- 5.4.8 Communities don't have all the tools – planners, lawyers, architects etc. – to support the development of a community initiative. They should not be required to personally acquire them prior to receiving external investment. A private entrepreneur usually only brings ideas and energy, just like the community-based social entrepreneurs, and then buys in the additional expertise as necessary. How do we best replicate this scenario for community led developments? And how do we proceed when there aren't any local anchor organisations to build out from?
- 5.4.9 Research by SURF¹ indicated that on the one hand, the fundamental issues of power and trust are under addressed in partnership processes and on the other hand that despite this, communities remain keen to participate in community based partnership activity.

The Scottish Community Foundation and others have done a lot of work in identifying and supporting community leaders in Scotland. More should be done to build on the continuing enthusiasm for genuine community participation and in developing and linking with community leadership.

5.5 Where is the investment in preventative spend?

- 5.5.1 A strong case for investment in early intervention has been made via the Christie Commission and elsewhere but where are the resources to make this happen? Can we realistically expect public bodies to make further cuts front-line services at a time of rising demand in order to introduce more 'preventative spend'?
- 5.5.2 The statutory obligations and delivery targets of Local Authorities and the NHS make adequate investment in preventative spend problematic. This is particularly the case when politicians and the public are so closely focused on maintaining mainstream services and targets like waiting times. Failing to address this conundrum now will mean greater spending for many years to come. Despite the challenges, it is essential to take responsibility and get this right in the current climate.

¹ Including a 2005 'Leadership in the Community' study commissioned by the Scottish Government (<http://www.scotregen.co.uk/knowledge/publications.asp?sid=7>) and a 2010 survey of SURF's national network community representatives (<http://www.scotregen.co.uk/knowledge/fags.asp?Itemid=230>).

- 5.5.3 Successful intervention is about getting the community infrastructure right. This requires holistic thinking and working, which is difficult in the current circumstances, which tend to produce 'patch defending' and 'retreating into silos' as common behaviour in all sectors.

5.6 Make better use of existing rights and equalities legislation

- 5.6.1 While human rights and equalities legislation is frequently under attack as a 'red tape' in some quarters, it is important that decision makers are aware of the impacts of service changes/reductions in terms of equalities and social rights. More positively, existing rights legislation can protect access to vital services and information, but it is not always well understood or appropriately employed to protect communities and individuals rights.
- 5.6.2 Impact assessments are commonly disregarded or misunderstood as simple 'tick-box' exercises. In fact, they can greatly help to inform spending decisions by encouraging more long term thinking on outcomes.

5.7 Some final points

- 5.7.1 Ten years of economic growth, and substantially increased public spending, has failed to alleviate poverty and disadvantage.
- 5.7.2 A barrier to effective community engagement is that local authorities can be highly sensitive to the release and sharing of information with the public. Equally, non-professionals are often not comfortable in using bureaucratic processes to articulate and achieve their goals.
- 5.7.3 Disadvantaged remote communities in north Scotland experience bureaucratic abandonment much more keenly than central belt settlements. Fuel poverty is also a major issue for the former.
- 5.7.4 Independent funders can bring a 'challenge' function along with their resources to benefit community development.
- 5.7.5 Demographics and climate change require action in the recession, and are additional long-term challenges for disadvantaged communities.
- 5.7.6 Despite the frequency of assertions to the opposite, the evidence of economic and social reality is that Scotland is not an egalitarian society when compared to the European average. In attempting to address current and future challenges it is unhelpful to perpetuate such romantic myths.

5.7.7 The requirement of having to apply for jobs online is a massive discriminatory factor against those from deprived communities who often lack internet access at home and elsewhere in their community.

5.7.8 Well-mannered intellectual debates (even this one) among professionals fail to capture the very real and extremely harsh reality of poverty and inequalities in communities across Scotland today. It is imperative to find ways of effectively bridging this reality gap with politicians, policy-makers and the media.

6 Further development - Where next from here

The next phase of this programme of collaborative work will focus on 'ameliorative responses', and how communities are working with their partners to alleviate the recessionary impacts and to find more sustainable ways forward.

Following completion of the programme of activities, the findings will be used:

- As a basis for the 2012 SURF Annual Conference in May, the central theme of which is investment in community empowerment
- To inform the consultation process for the Scottish Government's forthcoming Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill
- To develop a set of recommendations for regeneration policy makers and practitioners, aimed at minimising the impact of continuing economic difficulties on disadvantaged communities and developing more sustainable community regeneration approaches.

For more information, please visit the SURF website (www.scotregen.co.uk) or contact SURF Chief Executive Andy Milne (0141 585 6848, andymilne@scotregen.co.uk).

Appendix: Elaboration on outcomes from first phase of programme

The two central points highlighted in section three are expanded upon below. This appendix also briefly summarises some other issues raised by participants in the first phase of the programme.

Small Cuts

There is a disproportionately negative impact on disadvantaged communities from the effect of relatively minor centralised 'savings' in, firstly, basic physical maintenance regimes. Examples given included reductions in arrangements for grass-cutting, litter and refuse collection, fence and road mending, lighting and landscaping. There was a perception of negative impacts on performance from the 'contracting out' of such services.

The resultant decline in physical appearance was seen to have damaged internal and external perceptions of place and people. This repels the prospect of new external investments and undermines existing ones. It also tends to erode community resilience and individual residents' personal investment in their homes and neighbourhoods at a time of increased local social and economic pressures. This ranges from abandoning voluntary work in the management and service delivery of community organisations to failing to maintain gardens and reasonable standards of neighbourliness.

Secondly, disadvantaged communities often have responsive internal support networks based on social connections, projects and services developed over time in response to local needs and conditions. The Scottish Government is increasingly interested in the possibility of building on this network of activity to deliver greater community empowerment. This is currently being promoted as a potentially vital alternative source of community led regeneration in the face of reduced external investment. *Link: [Achieving a Sustainable Future](#) – Scottish Government Regeneration Strategy (2011)*

Evidence from the case studies indicates that cuts in the relatively small scale grants and contracts to local services and social enterprises are undermining the basis for community empowerment as a way out of the currently accelerated cycle of decline in disadvantaged areas. *Link: [Beneath the Radar: Investing in Small Local Organisations](#) – Scotland's Funders Forum Report (2011)*

The resulting loss of capacity in local support organisations cuts off two-way partnership activity pipelines at the local level. It also damages prospects for services, opportunities, vitality, and social cohesion at a time of higher stresses within disadvantaged communities, homes and individuals. This is seen as the opposite of the 'preventative spend' approach, which was recently vaunted by the Scottish Government. *Link: [Scottish Spending Review 2011 and Draft Budget 2012-13](#) (2011)*

Blocked Systems

Despite initial media speculation on a 'white collar recession', successive studies have shown that it is residents of disadvantaged areas who have been particularly affected by stagnation and contractions in the employment market. *Link – [The Smith Group Report: Recommendations to Scottish Government](#) (2011)*

This has had the effect of blocking off opportunities for young people and others seeking employment, training and further education. *Link: [Young People and Recession: A Lost Regeneration?](#) Centre for Economic Research Report by Prof David Bell & Prof David Blanchflower (2010)*

In addition to the thwarting of individual hopes and ambitions, the stagnation has also built up pressure on local employment support organisations; threatening their business plans, future sustainability and therefore their ability to deliver an increasingly important local service. This was clearly evident in the work of Glasgow South West Regeneration Agency which strives to continue operating as a social enterprise supporting access to employment for residents of the East Govan case study area. Within this blocked system there was evidence of the continuing additional difficulties faced by minority groups and people with particular needs who continue to suffer from negative discrimination in accessing what limited opportunities still exist. *Link: [A Review of Poverty and Ethnicity in Scotland](#) – Joseph Rowntree Foundation Report, Gina Netto et al (2011)*

The same blockage phenomenon is evident with regard to local housing where those who have bought find they cannot sell. The lack of lending and capital investment means that there is little new house building for rent or sale. The resultant stagnation has halted plans for supporting greater local economic diversification, intended to support wider regeneration agendas. It also locks young people out and confines growing children and families to inadequate accommodation with obvious wider negative effects.

There was evidence that some householders who cannot sell go on to rent out their properties to individuals with no long-term commitment to the area or understanding of their community responsibilities. This was said to be a significant factor in local decline. It was noted that this tended to be an especially rapid process in blocks of flats and one which can instigate a highly damaging 'domino' effect over the surrounding streets and then the wider community.

Other Issues

Beyond these two central themes, the main concerns relating to the impact of the recession raised by participants in the case study process and/or subsequent seminar discussions, were:

Lost Investment: The prolonged stalling of private sector, physical development investment is seen to be resulting in the fracturing and failure of previously agreed partnership based regeneration strategies and master-plans. This is especially the case in disadvantaged areas which are most vulnerable in the current recession to the ‘flight to prime’ of both private and public investment programmes. The effect is to leave existing regeneration related investments isolated and economically unsustainable.

Sense of Abandonment: It was noted that, for reasons of cost efficiency, locally-developed and valued services are being spread increasingly thinly across wider geographies, resulting in loss of local service impact and sense of ownership. In this context, there was some concern that what is seen as continuing and necessary, limited and targeted investment in specific thematic groups – who still suffer discrimination and disadvantage on a wider and more dispersed geography – could appear divisive to some in contrast to the draining away of broader opportunities and support for the more general local population.

Short-Term Focus: It was argued that the recession has resulted in a broad shift away from long-term thinking around holistic regeneration goals to a more narrow, immediate-future focus. Some participants acknowledged this as an understandable response, although it also engendered a sense of frustration with the perception that some regeneration players apparently valued protecting departmental teams and budgets over the quality and targeting of service delivery. *Link – [Mitigating Risks for Scotland’s Communities](#), a 2011-12 Glasgow Caledonian University project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.*

It was also noted that public and voluntary agencies are tending to compete with, rather than complement, the work of other organisations in related fields. There was anecdotal evidence of this trend being exacerbated by the fiscally aggressive procurement processes of some local authorities.

Erosion of Networks: The scale, depth and range of social networks in community groups and less formal associations was seen to be diminishing rapidly as the recession continued. Some experienced community volunteers were observed to have apparently ‘given up’, with the financial climate extinguishing their enthusiasm and dampening their hopes for serious future improvement. New volunteers have become harder to recruit as the reduction of resources leads to fewer interactions and supported opportunities for involvement.

Complex Policy Architecture: The recessionary funding cuts were seen to have exacerbated issues concerning new policy developments from the UK, Scottish and local governments. In areas such as employability and tackling poverty, certain agencies reported apparent policy contradictions and unhelpful developments in the way even well-intentioned policy changes led to negative outcomes upon interaction with existing regulations. For example, one agency reported that it became necessary for it to

suddenly discontinue relationships developed over the longer-term with vulnerable clients in the local area when a national policy dictated that, for reasons of consistency, such clients should start reporting to another agency in a different part of the city.

End of summary paper

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