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SURF RESPONSE TO THE 2018 SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION ON TACKLING SOCIAL ISOLATION

Background

In 2015, the Scottish Parliament's Committee for Equal Opportunities conducted an inquiry on social isolation in Scotland, using the following definition as the basis for investigation:

“Social isolation could be defined as an objective, measurable state of having minimal contact with other people, such as family, friends or the wider community.”ⁱ

The inquiry is thought to be a global first on the subject by a parliamentary institution.ⁱ The ensuing report, [Age and Social Isolation](#), was published in October 2015. Its key claim, that loneliness is “as damaging to Scots’ health as poverty and poor housing”, was widely reported.ⁱⁱ

In response to the inquiry, the Scottish Government announced in its 2016-17 Programme for Government that it would develop a national social isolation strategy to, “ensure a holistic approach across government to problems of loneliness and isolation”.ⁱⁱⁱ

To support the development of this strategy, a public consultation was opened in January 2018, entitled [A Connected Scotland: Tackling Social Isolation and Loneliness and Building Stronger Communities](#).^{iv}

This paper presents a response to seven of the questions set out in the [associated consultation paper](#) on behalf of SURF – Scotland’s Regeneration Forum.^v

National Policy

Question 3 asks: “What does Government need to do nationally to better empower communities and create the conditions to allow social connections to flourish?”^v

As a forum for more than 250 member organisations that share a concern with the regeneration of Scotland’s poorest communities, SURF is increasingly aware of the harm social isolation can inflict on people and places.

A national response could usefully feature action in the following areas:

Community development – SURF argued in its [2016 Manifesto for Community Regeneration](#) that: “There has... been sustained underinvestment in basic community development activity and resources over the last two decades”.^{xxvii} Some communities even lack basic resources, such as an accessible meeting space for local people to gather and begin any process of development. Addressing this fundamental deficit, as part of a national social isolation strategy, would help to generate a range of inexpensive local responses, such as cross-generational social activities, regular learning classes, and breakfast/lunch clubs.

Direct services – the Campaign to End Loneliness asserts that lonely people “are notoriously difficult to identify”, and argues that dedicated approaches are often required to reach them.^{vi} The Scottish Government could commission direct intervention in communities with particularly high levels of social isolation, but which currently lack adequate targeted responses. The Good Morning Service, and other examples highlighted in our response to Q7 below, provide templates for success.

Health service links – there is a growing body of evidence on the substantial damage that loneliness does to physical and mental health.^{i xxviii} Health practitioners should therefore be trained and resourced to recognise social isolation in patients, and to recommend referral services as required. Social prescribing approaches, as referred to in our response to Q14 below, could also be used by health workers to help address loneliness.

Transport – the quality, cost and coverage of public transport routes has been recognised by the Equal Opportunities Committee and the Campaign to End Loneliness as a risk factor affecting loneliness.^{i vi} Regular and affordable transport services encourages the development of social connections. The decline in bus trips in Scotland, from 436m in 2011/12 to an estimated 393m in 2016/17, is a cause for concern in this regard.^{vii} Restricting or removing the current free travel pass for over 60s in Scotland, as has been proposed by some politicians and policy commentators, would exacerbate loneliness, especially among older, low-income, and/or rural-based people.^{viii}

Technology – trends towards increased use of online shopping, home entertainment and social media interactions can exacerbate social isolation.^{ix} But digital technologies can also enable people to become aware of new social opportunities, easily keep in touch with friends, family and former colleagues, and form valuable new relationships. The Equal Opportunities Committee report cited the City of Edinburgh Council’s online magazine *Get up and Go* as a strong paradigm.ⁱ The Scottish Government could consider how to improve the quality of online information in this area, and its promotion to those most affected by social isolation.

Good Practice

Question 7 asks: “Are you aware of any good practice in a local community to build social connections that you want to tell us about?”^v

Since 1998, SURF has been operating an annual awards scheme, the [SURF Awards for Best Practice in Community Regeneration](#). The SURF Awards have been delivered in partnership with the Scottish Government since 2003.

The purpose of the SURF Awards is to recognise and reward best practice and innovation in community regeneration, to share knowledge and experience of what works, and to highlight the role that regeneration projects have in improving wellbeing.

The SURF Awards shares emphasis between the physical, social and economic forms of regeneration activity through distinctive categories, including ‘Community Led Regeneration’, ‘Youth Employability’, and ‘Scotland’s Most Improved Place’.

Some SURF Award winners that have delivered impressive achievements in tackling social isolation at a local level are highlighted below:

The Good Morning Service

(winner, People Category, 2005 SURF Awards)

This north Glasgow initiative, managed by a community group of the same name, directly engages 300 local older people in poor health. Trained project staff call service users every day, year-round, providing a ‘friend on the phone’ to check on their health, keep the person up-to-date on local social opportunities, and provide referrals to home-visit befriending and other services. The SURF Awards judging panel felt it, “*evidenced significant results in improving the health and well-being of local residents who feel less isolated and more confident as a result of their daily call.*”^x

Pulteneytown People’s Project

(winner, People Category, 2007 SURF Awards)

A social enterprise that supports a deprived neighbourhood of Wick in the north of the Scottish Highlands, the Pulteneytown People’s Project operates at an impressive scale, with more than 1000 people using its services every week. It runs a wide range of activities and services, many of which are designed to reduce social isolation. Among others, these include as a Men’s Shed Group for men over the age of 55, a Hobbies Group for those interested in knitting and crochet, a Community Lunch Group, a Community Café, and free weekly classes on cooking, walking, and arts & crafts.^{xi xii}

The Portal

(winner, Creative Regeneration category, 2013 SURF Awards)

The Portal is a community arts hub that operates from a row of shop units in Govan, Glasgow, that had previously lain vacant for almost 20 years. It is now home to a ‘Making Art Matter’ programme, Sunny Govan Community Radio, an exhibition gallery, and a

meeting/workshop space. It provides a wide range of free opportunities for hundreds of local people aged from 5 to 95 to engage in creative activity. The project works to charitable aims and a number of its activities – including regular ‘Bead N Blether’ and ‘Creative Steps’ sessions – target loneliness. Notably, 70% of ‘Making Art Matter’ participants report that they have developed new friends and connections as a result of taking part the programme.^{xiii}

Horshader Community Growing

(winner, Community Led Regeneration category, 2014 SURF Awards)

Serving the remote, rural villages of South Shawbost, Dalbeag and Dalmore on the west coast of the Isle of Lewis, this initiative responds to social isolation challenges caused by the decline of traditional crofting, fishing and weaving industry, and the continual out-migration of young residents. Funded by a community-owned wind turbine, the project operates four food growing polytunnels, accessible covered allotment tunnels for community members to use, and a rolling programme of workshops on growing produce and preparing healthy meals. The SURF Awards judges noted that the project, “serves as a hub for the local community, bringing families and generations together in practical activities that have helped to grow the community as well as the produce”.^{xiv}

Dundee International Women’s Centre

(winner, Community Led Regeneration category, 2017 SURF Awards)

This project was established in 1969, when a voluntary group of women visited immigrant families in Dundee to offer help in integrating them into the community as part of an Urban Aid programme. Now a registered charity with a hub building in the Stobswell part of the city, Dundee International Women’s Centre helps women and girls from minority ethnic communities achieve personal goals and develop community connections. Among other activities, it provides English language classes, employability skills training, information and advice services, craft activity groups, and a cycling club. Project evaluations show that immigrants using the centre have reported a much-reduced feeling of isolation, which is often experienced by women coming to a new country.^{xv}

Physical Activity Interventions

Question 14 asks: “What more can we do to encourage people to get involved in local groups that promote physical activity?”^v

Learning from SURF’s [Alliance for Action regeneration support programme](#) indicates the effectiveness of delivering health information services in unconventional places such as supermarkets, pubs and football stadiums. This approach allows health professionals to engage with people, such as middle-aged men on low incomes, who have a tendency to avoid visiting their GP when faced with physical and mental health issues.

The similar concept of ‘social prescribing’ involves GPs or other health service workers prescribing patients with ‘social first aid’, such as a referral to a specific get-fit class or a

social group in the local community, in place of more generic advice, e.g. “get more exercise”.

Ideally, the class or group will be aware of the arrangement, and will be enthusiastic and welcoming towards prospective new members that are referred to it. With an emerging body of evidence suggesting that loneliness can be as detrimental to a person’s health as obesity, such an approach has high preventative value.ⁱⁱ

Pilot social prescribing projects in Scotland, including in Craigmillar (Edinburgh), Stobswell (Dundee) and Kincardine (Fife), have proved encouraging.^{xvi} SURF would be particularly keen to see a series of social prescribing pilots in General Practices in selected deprived Scottish communities, with a view to monitoring the social outcomes and exploring the potential of wider strategic delivery.

As NHS Health Scotland have noted, there are a number of developmental challenges that need to be overcome to provide an effective social prescribing service, including staff training, the maintenance of information on local opportunities, and the agreement of appropriate signposting or referring mechanisms with partners.^{xvii}

Genuine social prescribing requires a formal, well-resourced and high-profile approach that could form a natural core of the forthcoming national social isolation strategy.

Promotion of Volunteering

Question 18 asks: “*What more can the Scottish Government do to promote volunteering and help remove barriers to volunteering, particular for those who may be isolated?*”^v

The Scottish Government is rightly enthusiastic about the potential of community knowledge and participation in informing and supporting any effort to address isolation, poverty and inequality at the neighbourhood level. Many would-be community volunteers, however, lack the employment flexibility to regularly contribute to local community group activities.

Evidence from SURF’s *Alliance for Action* site in East Kirkcaldy suggests that the establishment of formal employer support arrangements would help more people contribute to community initiatives. Such arrangements may include employers providing compensation in time or pay for hours spent by workers representing their community in official forums.

The Scottish Government could encourage the growth of such arrangements by developing a voluntary branded scheme and encouraging employers to sign up; as has proved successful in the example of the Scottish Living Wage Campaign. Many employers are keen for their staff to engage in local volunteering activities, and may welcome the positive associations that could come with membership of a national employer supported volunteering scheme.

Volunteering arguably deserves a higher status in Scottish Government policy more generally. As an academic study on the changing landscape for the third sector in Scotland produced for the Scottish Government in 2012 noted, “*Volunteering was also perceived [by third sector organisations] to be low on the Scottish Government agenda... [and] variations in policy priorities between local authorities remained an ongoing issue*”.^{xviii} A particular concern for SURF

is the imbalance in volunteering participation between affluent and poor communities, as evidenced in the consultation paper.^y Efforts to increase volunteering levels in Scotland should therefore be prioritised in the most disadvantaged places, where participation levels are consistently low.

In addition, as SURF noted in its response to a 2017 UK Government Department of Work and Pensions consultation on the proposed closures of several job centres in disadvantaged areas of Glasgow, job centres have an important role to play in making appropriate referrals to skills training courses, volunteer opportunities and other forms of personal support for unemployed people.^{xix}

Being made unemployed can be a major driver of reduced self-worth, a lower ability to maintain – or form new – social connections, and chronic loneliness.^{xx} It is therefore important that job centres maintain links with organisations that can help address social isolation. While job centre management remains a reserved UK Government area, the Scottish Government and its agencies have a key role in supporting the local partner connections they make.

The Built Environment

Question 20 asks: *“What are the barriers presented by the lived environment in terms of socially connecting? How can these be addressed?”*^y

Well-designed social places, from town squares and outdoor marketplaces to park benches and waterfront walkways, provide unique opportunities for chance social encounters, structured communal activity, and general social confidence development. Places with walkable neighbourhoods, attractive green spaces and mixed use development can deliver a range of policy benefits, including encouraging greater social interactions and healthier lifestyles.^{xxi}

Barriers to the development of social places can take a range of forms. ‘Unsocial’ places can be caused, for example, by the presence of vacant land and derelict buildings, by urban design decisions such as the development of a new motorway that reduces a place’s walkability, or from social problems such as a rise in crime in a public park.

Discrete barriers will require distinct interventions, but one catch-all approach that can significantly improve place-based social connections is participatory design. Rooted in 1970s Scandinavian initiatives, participatory design in place-making requires urban designers to cede control of the design process to the local residents that will ultimately use the space being developed.^{xxii}

The rising use of Community Charrettes – SURF has managed two with Scottish Government support, ‘Remaking Rothesay’ (2016) and ‘Think Dunoon!’ (2017) – is a further welcome trend towards greater community input into place-making projects. Community Charrettes, participatory design and related approaches align strongly with one of SURF’s founding principles, which is:

“The people who are the intended beneficiaries of any regeneration effort must be meaningfully involved in the process if it is to be successful in planning, implementation and maintenance”.^{xxiii}

Another positive development is the enthusiasm for innovative, cost-effective models for creating social spaces in abandoned urban places, such as New York's High Line, a former disused rail line that has been converted into a popular linear park.^{xxiv} West Dunbartonshire Council and Scottish Canals are currently exploring plans to deliver a similar development in West Dunbartonshire, while Glasgow City Council have commissioned feasibility work into a 'rooftop' garden above a city centre section of the M8 motorway.^{xxv xxvi}

Older and disabled people, who are disproportionately more likely to suffer from social isolation, also have particular built environment needs that urban designers could do more to recognise and respond to.^{xxii}

Culture and Heritage

Question 21 asks: *"How can cultural services and agencies play their part in reducing social isolation and loneliness?"*^v

As highlighted in our response to Q7 above, The Portal arts hub in Govan is an exemplar on the valuable role of creative activities in helping socially isolated people develop new local friendships, build social confidence, and improve their general wellbeing.

Other 'Creative Regeneration' SURF Award winning cultural organisations – namely Lochcarron Community Development Company (Ross-shire), North Edinburgh Arts, RIG Arts (Greenock), The Stove Network (Dumfries), and WAVEparticle (Glasgow) – have also demonstrated an ability to engage community members suffering from, or vulnerable to, loneliness in arts-based social activities.

Mainstream cultural services could usefully learn from such targeted, community-based approaches. Many cultural institutions such as libraries, museums, art galleries and cinemas run social groups, free classes/events and volunteering opportunities targeted at local elderly people. A new national social isolation strategy could explore opportunities for raising awareness of such opportunities among the general population.

In its 2016 Manifesto for Community Regeneration, SURF argued that the role of cultural organisations in place-based regeneration plans is generally underdeveloped.^{xxvii} Decision-makers in regeneration project plans could give greater consideration to the mutually productive potential of joint working with local cultural bodies.

By way of example, community arts strategies delivered on the back of new housing developments can help reduce the social isolation that can develop when a person moves into an unfamiliar new community. This approach was demonstrated effectively by the previously mentioned SURF Award winning collaborative initiative by Urban Union, New Gorbals Housing Association and WAVEparticle in Laurieston, Glasgow.^{xxviii}

Monitoring and Evaluation

Question 25 asks: *"Do you agree with the framework we have created to measure our progress in tackling social isolation and loneliness?"*^v

Yes. The consultation paper sets out a clear and logical framework that considers social isolation from multiple perspectives, and which notes its effects on diverse health and social areas, from depression and self-harm to volunteering levels and community responses to anti-social behaviour.

Recognition of the need to improve understanding of social isolation drivers and effects at both policy-making and practitioner level is also welcome.

While the framework is understandably described in the paper as a starting point, it will be challenging to measure progress without further detail. We would be interested in learning more about how baselines will be established for indicators such as, “*More people recognise the triggers and signs of loneliness*”, and how progress will be monitored.^y

Conclusion

SURF welcomes the Scottish Government’s efforts to include social isolation on the priority public policy agenda. As the commendable Equal Opportunities Committee 2015 report makes clear, this is a significant social problem in Scotland, which given anticipated demographic changes, appears certain to continue rising if unaddressed.ⁱ

The delivery of a well-designed and high-profile national social isolation strategy has the potential to produce tangible improvements in health, wellbeing and quality of life, particularly among older generations. The consultation paper is admirable in considering a wide range of policy and practice areas that could usefully feature in the strategy.

As stated above, SURF would like to see the strategy feature particular considerations on targeted activity in deprived areas, accompanied by wider action in community development, art & culture, transport, technology, urban design processes, and volunteering.

SURF would be pleased to help raise awareness of the final strategy to its members and wider contacts in physical, social and economic regeneration in Scotland.

End of response; references follow

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