



An Alliance for Action in Langholm?

A SURF Event Report | 23 Nov 2017 | The Buccleuch Centre, Langholm



1 About This Paper

This report presents a summary of a public event held by SURF in the town of Langholm in November 2017. The event purpose was for SURF to offer explanatory information and to gather local views on the opportunities and challenges concerning community regeneration in the town, and whether Langholm would benefit from being part of SURF's *Alliance for Action* programme.

2 Introduction

SURF's *Alliance for Action* programme, which started in 2013, is a community regeneration initiative that enhances the coordination of local assets & aspirations, while productively linking them with relevant national policies & resources.

The twin aim is to support better practical outcomes locally, and to draw out learning in support of improving wider national policy and practice. The *Alliance for Action* programme, which is supported by the Scottish Government, is focused on a coherent set of selected places with shared and distinct regeneration challenges.

In all *Alliance for Action* sites, SURF works to enhance successful community regeneration activity, investments and shared learning. It does so by establishing, facilitating and working with an alliance of willing, cross-sector stakeholders.

SURF already support *Alliance for Action* collaborations in Dunoon (Argyll & Bute), East Kirkcaldy (Fife), Govan (Glasgow), and Rothesay (Argyll & Bute).

SURF is currently undertaking feasibility studies in Langholm and Dundee to explore the potential of adding a further two sites to the programme for the 2018-21 period.

3 Event Overview

As part of the feasibility study for Langholm, this gathering was held on the evening of Thursday 23 November in The Buccleuch Centre, the town's arts venue. The event followed a series of one-to-one meetings and small group engagements conducted by SURF in Langholm in September and October.

SURF publicised the event via email to local contacts and groups, by arranging for the display of posters in various town locations, and by taking out a full page advertisement in the local newspaper. The event was attended by around 30 individuals, including:

- Representatives of the following community groups: Eskdale Foundation, Langholm Action Group, Langholm, Ewes & Westerkirk Community Council, Langholm First, Langholm Initiative, and Langholm Regeneration Group.
- Representatives of Dumfries & Galloway Council (Elected Members and Officers) and NHS Dumfries & Galloway.
- Representatives of other local stakeholders including Ashleybank Investments, the Church of Scotland, the Eskdale & Liddesdale Advertiser, and FTS Dyers.
- Langholm residents not attached to any particular group or business.
- SURF Chief Executive, Andy Milne, and SURF Policy & Participation Manager, Derek Rankine.



Community groups, public agencies and local businesses were represented at the gathering

The event programme was as follows:

- | | |
|--------|--|
| 6:30pm | Getting Together with tea, coffee and scones |
| 7:00pm | SURF Introduction: who we are & the Alliance for Action |
| 7:10pm | The Langholm Process So Far: SURF's initial understandings |
| 7:30pm | Open Discussion: views, comments and information exchange |
| 8:15pm | SURF Summary: what's next |
| 8:30pm | Close of event |

The main subjects raised in open debate concerned:

- Langholm's economy;
- Opportunities for promoting tourism;
- The town's relationship with Dumfries & Galloway, the Scottish Borders and Cumbria;
- Land ownership and use;
- Transport;
- Housing and infrastructure;
- Community empowerment;
- The role SURF might play in supporting the town's future development.

The following section includes the main comments made under each of these themes.

4 Event Report

4.1 SURF Introduction

SURF's Andy Milne and Derek Rankine provided introductory information, in which they covered:

- The background to SURF and its *Alliance for Action* programme;
- The ongoing five-stage, six-month *Alliance for Action* feasibility study for Langholm;
- Perceptions of the town's assets, opportunities and challenges, as identified by local stakeholders to SURF in the initial series of engagements;
- The local issues SURF may have to respond to, in the event of an agreement for Langholm to become an *Alliance for Action* site following the completion of the feasibility study.

Prior to initiating an open discussion, Andy Milne said he was particularly keen to understand if:

- SURF had so far missed anything event participants felt was important – positive or negative;
- Any of the above items chimed particularly strongly with those present;
- The SURF Alliance for Action programme would be a potentially beneficial service for Langholm – or an unhelpful distraction.

4.2 Open Debate

SURF's Andy Milne then facilitated the subsequent open discussion. The points expressed by participants during this session are recorded below and grouped by theme.

Please note that the various views and assertions made by individuals recorded in this section are not all mutually consistent and do not necessarily reflect a consensus among those present, or the views of any specific organisations, including SURF.

4.2.1 Economic Purpose

- Langholm has to accept its industrial heyday has gone. It should now work toward becoming a recreation and leisure town.
- While big industry has gone and won't come back, there is a genuine opportunity for the growth of small scale businesses in arts, crafts and manufacturing.
- Depopulation and related problems will continue unless young people can be encouraged to stay in the town. They rarely have cars and find it too difficult to use public transport to live

in Langholm and work or attend College in nearby towns in Dumfries & Galloway and the Borders.

- Young people are constantly told that they need to leave Langholm to find good work, training and education opportunities. There are, however, some high quality opportunities available locally. Schools and local agencies should publicise these opportunities more clearly, because currently young people pick up a negative attitude towards the town and tend to migrate away as soon as they can, never to come back.
- A Langholm Creative Network is in development to showcase local arts talent and encourage artists from other places to set up in Langholm. Artists are becoming increasingly aware of Langholm and its already successful festivals show that people are willing to travel to the town and spend money on cultural activity.
- Recruiting health and social care staff is very difficult in Langholm. Can the town find a way of providing suitable qualifications, training or apprenticeships to local young people to meet this need?
- The town's rich historical and environmental heritage may offer the best prospects for economic regeneration.



Around 30 participants attended the gathering

4.2.2 Tourist Offer

- As SURF's summary suggested, the tourism offer in Langholm is presently underplayed. Potential development opportunities might include:
 - A Borders Reivers Centre: the town would offer the perfect base for this, straddling the Borders and Cumbria heritage trails and offering convenient access to international visitors via Glasgow, Edinburgh and Newcastle airports.
 - A Thomas Telford Museum: a centre dedicated to the celebrated 19th century engineer could be housed in the former Primary School building, currently vacant.
 - A Genealogy Service: there has been a recent growth in visitors from England, the USA, Australia and elsewhere, who have come to the town to find out more about their surnames and family history. Langholm could build on this by providing an expert to help people explore their roots through local archives and signposting to relevant places. This is a potentially lucrative market and development grants are available – but there are high running costs and it might not be a viable commercial venture. In any case, a dedicated Internet resource could be used to provide basic information on local family names and attract more international visitors.
- Crowdfunding ventures – which seek small donations from local people and ex-pats to support community projects – could be explored as a way of initiating new tourist-friendly community led developments.
- An improved tourism profile in VisitScotland marketing communications would be helpful. VisitScotland, however, have confirmed that the onus is on groups in Langholm to tell them about what is available to see and do locally.

4.2.3 Geographic Boundaries

- Langholm would be a great place for local young people to live while they engaged in further education in nearby Carlisle. But this doesn't happen because the different Scottish

& English education system arrangements make Carlisle College courses too expensive. Scottish Colleges and Universities are beyond easy commuting distance, hence why so many school leavers relocate to the central belt.

- Beyond the administrative catchment, Langholm isn't truly 'connected' to Dumfries and Galloway. Economic, transport and cultural links are stronger with the Cumbria and Borders regions.
- There is a reasonable argument for Langholm to be 'moved' to the Scottish Borders region. It has much more in common with Borders towns culturally and economically, from rugby to the textiles industry. Langholm also features in Borders heritage trails.
- Langholm sits on an unusual north-south axis that points to, and links most strongly with, Hawick in the Borders to the north and Carlisle in Cumbria to the south.
- Dumfries and Galloway Council's attentions are focused on the area around Dumfries and to the west.
- The Borderlands Initiative and the proposed Borderlands Growth Deal – two collaborations between the five local authorities either side of the Scotland/England border – may present opportunities for new infrastructure investments that cross boundary lines.
- Langholm's remoteness from Dumfries is a big issue, administratively and in terms of transport and economic links.
- SURF's feasibility study may prove challenging to Dumfries and Galloway Council if it reports that a significant number of local people feel that the local authority is not supporting the town effectively.
- The town's geographic 'separateness' could be turned to advantage as a distinctive selling point: a place for 'Borderers', people who grow up close to the Scotland/England border, to better understand their identity.

4.2.4 Land

- The natural environment is a huge asset to the town. It is surprising that it didn't feature more strongly on the list drafted by SURF on the back of its initial engagements.
- Langholm has benefited from stable land ownership patterns, but Brexit influenced decisions currently being made by the Buccleuch Estate indicate a coming period of change and disruption. The Estate, which has owned land around Langholm for more than 400 years, is seeking to develop much of its farmland into forestry because of concerns around reduced farming subsidies post-Brexit.
- New commercial forests around Langholm may inhibit outdoor tourism, including preventing access to some popular walking and cycling trails.
- The reduction of local farms will have a negative impact for the local economy, as many shops and suppliers based in Langholm depend on demand from farmers.



The event was held in Langholm's Buccleuch Centre

- Unlike in the Highlands, the community land ownership model has not proved popular in the south of Scotland. In Langholm, one reason for this is that the high volume of local land held by the Buccleuch Estate limits opportunities for community bodies.
- Buccleuch Estate staff tend to have limited engagement in Langholm community discussions. While it supports the Muckletoon Adventure Festival and mountain bike trails, its representatives tend not to participate in town meetings or community led projects. For example, they refused to discuss a modest proposal by a local community group for a new walking trail, without providing an explanation.

4.2.5 Transport

- The impact of today's road closures (some roads into Langholm were closed for several hours on the day of the event as a result of a road accident) show that unreasonable levels of personal and commercial inconvenience are placed on residents when something goes wrong.
- There is one local road that has been closed for more than two years. It is likely to take until Autumn 2018 before the problem can be addressed and the road reopened.
- There are some good reasons behind road closures, including to comply with health and safety policies and to deliver welcome enhancements, but the long diversions are disruptive and damaging for business and tourism.
- When the A7 is closed, the town can feel like a small island cut off from the mainland, especially for the many residents who work in Carlisle. This also creates a major vulnerability by blocking efficient emergency service access.
- The Scottish Government is aware of the town's A7 dependency, and is investigating the possibility of Langholm being included in a proposed extension of the Borders Railway from Tweedbank to Carlisle.



Economic development, tourism and transport were among the topics discussed

4.2.6 Housing & Infrastructure

- Langholm fundamentally needs new housing more than it needs new jobs. There are jobs within easy reach, 20 miles away in Carlisle.
- New housing in a town tends to bring new business.
- There is a floodplain problem that discourages housing developers from investigating possibilities in Langholm – but this is not an insurmountable problem.
- Loreburn Housing Association have plans for 34 units of new housing in the town, and conducted a well-received public meeting in mid-November. The momentum behind this planned development is strong, although the intended development land has yet to be revealed.
- The Loreburn development is being delivered in partnership with NHS Dumfries & Galloway. It will have a social care focus and will also create a new health and wellbeing centre.

4.2.8 SURF's Potential Role

- SURF will not be able to ensure that community leaders with strong opposing views can agree with each other and work together, but it may be able to support adequate identification and collaboration on a specific set of shared local challenges.
- Any such effort should not 'put the cart before the horse', *i.e.* project vehicles and structures should not be developed before a list of local priorities are agreed. Priority project themes should be agreed first, and only then should considerations be given to the practicalities of progressing them – form following function.
- Local people have been 'surveyed to death'. Previous examples, *e.g.* Langholm Futures and the CADISPA Trust, have resulted in some good research, but little by way of useful outcomes. SURF should be conscious of 'consultation fatigue' and past disappointments.
- SURF would strive not to set up a new organisation to deliver the Alliance for Action work locally over 2018-21, if there was an agreement to proceed. With sufficient partner and local agreement, however, there may be scope for SURF to engage a locally-based part-time development worker to facilitate action on jointly agreed priorities and processes.
- SURF is aware of previous and present efforts to bring local groups together and explore the town's regeneration priorities. It would not seek to duplicate or confuse these efforts.
- SURF's positive interactions with the Mount Stuart Trust with its *Alliance for Action* project on the Isle of Bute indicate some success in its ability to establish a process within which large landowners can engage collaboratively in community regeneration dialogue, investments and activity.
- As an outside body, some cynicism towards what SURF can do for the town would be natural. But if reasonably early and purposeful action is demonstrated, trust will be easier to build.

4.3 What's Next

Andy and Derek thanked all participants for their contributions, and said that if people had any comments they didn't get a chance to raise, or would prefer to do so privately and anonymously, they were welcome to use stamped and addressed comment postcards, which were distributed at the meeting, or to send SURF an email.

They said that additional postcards would be made available in various town venues, including the Town Hall, and that this form of feedback would be accepted into early 2018. Participants who wished to receive a copy of the event report and information on future engagement opportunities were also invited to provide SURF with their contact details.

The next steps are to take the outcomes from the gathering into account alongside those from SURF's other engagements and ongoing research.

A key element of that process will be to examine alignment and apparent gaps between the emerging local priorities and assets and the existing plans and processes of key institutional stakeholders, including Dumfries & Galloway Council, the intended Scottish Government backed South of Scotland Skills and Enterprise Agency, the Borderlands Initiative and the Scottish Government's 'soft' rural infrastructure plan.

SURF will continue to deliver feasibility study activities and record feedback in Langholm up to the end of March 2018. At that time, SURF expects to know whether Langholm will participate in a 2018-21 Alliance for Action programme. This depends on local stakeholder views and agreement by the Scottish Government to extend their current support for SURF's Alliance for Action programme.

5 Further Information

SURF is grateful to Dumfries and Galloway Council and the Buccleuch Centre for their assistance towards delivery of this event, which was funded by the Scottish Government as part of SURF's *Alliance for Action* programme.

Further information on SURF is available at: www.surf.scot/what-we-do/

More on the *Alliance for Action* can be found at: www.surf.scot/projects/alliance-for-action/

For any queries about this event, or SURF's Langholm Feasibility Study or *Alliance for Action* programme more generally, please contact Andy or Derek on:

- Andy Milne, Chief Executive – 0141 440 6390, andy@surf.scot
- Derek Rankine, Policy and Participation Manager – 0141 440 6393, derek@surf.scot

End of Report

6 December 2017



The 2017-18 Alliance for Action programme is delivered by SURF – Scotland's Regeneration Forum and supported by the Scottish Government.



[Sign Up for SURF's Monthly E-bulletin](#)



[Follow SURF on Twitter](#)



[Like SURF on Facebook](#)

SURF Scotland's Regeneration Forum. Orkney Street Enterprise Centre, 18-20 Orkney Street, Glasgow G51 2BX
Tel: 0141 440 0122 / Email: info@surf.scot / Website: www.surf.scot

SURF is a registered charity (no. SC 047 438) and a company limited by guarantee (no. SC 154 598). Registered in Scotland as 'Scotregen Ltd'. VAT reg. no. 735 2880 21.

Supported by: Aberdeen City Council, Capital City Partnership, City of Edinburgh Council, Clyde Gateway, Creative Scotland, Dundee Partnership, Glasgow City Council, Glasgow Housing Association, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, Jobs & Business Glasgow, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, the Scottish Government, and Skills Development Scotland.