



SURF EVIDENCE FOR SCOTTISH GOVERNMENTT RESEARCH INTO IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON COMMUNITIES

BACKGROUND

“The Scottish Government is researching the impact of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic on personal, community and societal wellbeing.

“As part of the programme of analytical work we are looking to understand the perspectives from different settings and we are inviting a number of organisations including yours, to complete a short survey to help us better understand the concerns, priorities, opportunities and wider experiences of the people and communities that your organisation works with.”

Further information: <https://consult.gov.scot/housing-and-social-justice/f2578d02/>

RESPONSE TO SET QUESTIONS

1. Please tell us about your organisation's aim(s), geographical focus, client groups and community activities since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic (i.e. from mid-March)?

SURF is Scotland's Regeneration Forum. SURF's overall objective is to improve the lives and opportunities of residents in Scotland's disadvantaged communities. To meet this goal, SURF's key aims are: to provide a neutral space for all sectors and players in Scottish community regeneration to share their knowledge and experience; to stimulate challenging debate about community regeneration policy and practice; to maintain a high status for community regeneration on Scotland's political agenda; and to provide relevant and constructive feedback to key policy-makers.

SURF is a Scotland-wide organisation with a diverse cross-sector membership of over 300 organisations. SURF members range in size from small community groups to some of Scotland's largest private companies. Membership organisations also include local authorities, housing associations, health boards, academic institutions, professional bodies and charities.

Since the pandemic unfolded, SURF has worked to ensure it can continue to be fully effective in its key role of connecting partners, places, policies and priorities, which has become all the more important in a time of crisis.

Like most organisations, SURF has faced a number of pressing practical, financial and logistical challenges in recent weeks as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. SURF's staff are working remotely and have been making alternative arrangements for a busy schedule of participative events that we had programmed over the Spring and Summer.

We have agreed a set of four complementary COVID-19 oriented 2020/21 projects with the Scottish Government. They converge on the theme of building back better on the other side of the immediate crisis period and exploring opportunities more collaborative place-based approaches to community regeneration. In addition, we have contacted our members and stakeholders for information on how they are responding to the crisis at community level (see next item).

We have also continued progress towards a 2021 Manifesto for Community Regeneration and have started work on a COVID-19 edition of our online journal. The criteria of the 2020 SURF Awards for Best Practice in Community Regeneration has also been adjusted to reflect COVID-19 circumstances and enable the identification of best practice responses.

2. What information do you collect/hold/use to assess and monitor the general wellbeing of the people and communities you work with?

SURF has been contacting its members and stakeholders to gather diverse examples of community resilience during the pandemic. We have been showcasing these in a special weekly e-bulletin and on our website (link: <https://www.surf.scot/category/news/>). More than 60 such examples, rising each week, have been provided by representatives of community groups, social enterprises, local authorities, housing associations, and football clubs across Scotland. They summarise how local community services have developed or adapted to support the wellbeing of people living in places with significant social and economic challenges.

SURF also employs staff within communities to facilitate our place focused 'Alliance for Action' programme. Two are based in the towns of Dunoon and Langholm. Our Local Facilitators are closely involved with local players and responses, and providing the organisation with further understanding of how local wellbeing has been impacted in geographically disconnected small and medium towns.

2a. How is this information aggregated? Does it include breakdowns by location, age, gender, and any other characteristics?

The information collected for our e-bulletin community resilience series is in the form of text descriptions of at least 150 words per project or organisation. The locations are clear from the descriptions, but the series does not support quantitative data gathering on service users. Local Alliance for Action Facilitator reports are similar.

The information we have gathered can, however, provide useful insights into the challenges, problems, opportunities and positive actions taking place in communities in different parts of the

country. SURF is currently pulling together shared learning outcomes from the information and we would be pleased to share this with the Scottish Government upon completion.

Thinking about the people and communities you work with, which of the following, if any, has the coronavirus pandemic (including the restrictions and support arrangements put in place) impacted NEGATIVELY? Please select all that apply.

- Finances (including income, outgoings, financial security) Personal safety and security
 Social relationships and connections Physical and mental health Neighbourhood support
 Access to services Confidence in government Public services Ability to cope generally Other (please detail below)

If you have any specific examples or comments regarding negative impacts, please share them here

There have been a wide range of challenges reported to SURF, both at a personal (e.g. social isolation, unemployment, loss of community facilities) and organisational (e.g. funding crises, building closures, staff shortages) level. A consistent theme has been the impressive performance of under-resourced community organisations, acting effectively and in collaboration to meet immediate local challenges.

Larger scale statutory partners have generally been helpfully flexible on the repurposing of funds and targets but have struggled to engage purposefully with these varied local efforts, and to provide assurance of sustainable longer term support; both to lift inappropriate burdens from local activists, and to consolidate local collaborative successes.

3a. Thinking about the people and communities you work with, which of the following, if any, has the coronavirus pandemic (including the restrictions and support arrangements put in place) impacted POSITIVELY? Please select all that apply.

- Finances (including income, outgoings, financial security) Personal safety and security
 Social relationships and connections Physical and mental health Neighbourhood support
 Access to services Confidence in government Public services Ability to cope generally Other (please detail below)

Other – Organisational Collaboration

If you have any specific examples or comments regarding positive impacts, please share them here

There have been reports of positive developments in local relationship building at a community level between organisations that were previously in some form of friction and who are now collaborating effectively in response to pandemic driven demands. The hope is that these improved relationships can be sustained in the longer term. A number of organisations have also

benefited from the opportunity to connect with more local people, who they were not in contact with prior to developing food, wellbeing and/or delivery services during the pandemic.

Some SURF contacts have made reference to positive physical and mental health impacts. These include cases of individuals reporting an improved work/life balance from home working and enhanced opportunities for practical volunteering and exercise.

4. Have you developed any new ways of working (including new links with other organisations) to enable you to understand, and respond to, the issues facing the people and communities you work with? If so, please provide brief details.

Like many organisations, SURF has made greater use of video conferencing facilities to connect with partner bodies, members and other stakeholders. We plan to develop this further with a view to enabling geographically remote colleagues, who find it more difficult to attend SURF events (which are generally held in the central belt), to participate more fully in the SURF network. A hope is that SURF can use this enhanced interaction to further expand its exchange of knowledge, information and experience of community regeneration issues in settings such as the Highlands, Shetland and more central areas that are underserved by transport connections, such as the Ayrshire coast and Galloway in the south west.

5. Has your organisation started working with any new people or communities since the start of the coronavirus pandemic?

Yes.

If yes, what has brought about this new engagement?

SURF is actively engaging with academics and projects that have been undertaking research into COVID-19 impacts, with a view to informing and promoting their work via our wider network. We have also been contacted by public and voluntary sector officials who are keen to gather SURF's view of opportunities for building back better and supporting a new approach to place-based regeneration in the pandemic context. Some of these organisations are considering allocating some resources into regeneration activities beyond the immediate crisis period.

If yes, do you see this work continuing long-term, or is this a temporary shift for the duration of the coronavirus pandemic?

Any serious effort to build back better will necessarily require a long term commitment, especially for communities that are already struggling with multiple forms of deprivation. We hope, and expect, that the new partnerships SURF is looking to help forge in the current period, will have sufficiently robust political and resource commitments and be dedicated for the long-term.

6. What does your organisation understand as the short, medium and long term priorities of the people and communities you work with in responding to, and recovering from, the coronavirus pandemic?

In the short term, SURF shares the concern of University of Edinburgh Professor of Global Public Health Devi Sridhar, who argues that wealth is the best shield against the coronavirus for individuals. Deprived, higher density neighbourhoods and towns in the west of Scotland are

therefore at particularly high risk, as are thematic groups such as ethnic minorities and key workers on low incomes.

The significant level of investment that is currently going into front-line, short-term pandemic response services is welcome, but it is unclear if these investments will be sustained for the prolonged period in which exposure to COVID-19 infection remains a moderate risk.

Beyond contracting the virus, there is a growing consensus that the pandemic impacts and associated mitigation measures are likely to create a 'super-recession'. Already disadvantaged places face exacerbated challenges. Many organisations in the SURF network are reporting funding crises; regeneration projects face delay, cancellation or downsizing; some shuttered businesses in town centres and elsewhere are unlikely to reopen; and unemployment and social security needs are rising sharply, even while the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and other temporary support mechanisms are in place.

The longer term impacts of these combined challenges could be disastrous for already deprived places in urban and rural Scotland; and thereby for the rest of Scotland in terms of collective social and economic cohesion and wellbeing.

Of these, what seem like the most fundamental issues for the long term?

SURF is keenly aware of the scale of economic problems in already deprived and disconnected places. The degenerative pressures of the post-pandemic recession will be perhaps the most pressing problem in the years to come. SURF is submitting evidence to the Scottish Government's independent advisory group on economic recovery. We hope our work will help to inform practical and well targeted options for building back better.

7. Are there any new opportunities that this situation has created that you see as valuable for the recovery period and your longer term practice (e.g. new relationships/partnerships, communication flows, technology, etc.)?

Internationally, nationally and locally, the scale and nature of the crisis is exposing deep underlying fragilities in the economic and social systems that have been allowed to develop in recent decades. It is also providing a much needed boost for essential fresh thinking on alternative approaches and enhanced cooperation towards addressing the interconnected challenges of poverty, inequalities, sustainability and collective wellbeing.

National agencies, local government, businesses and community and voluntary organisations have to collaborate more actively and effectively. That is not easy at the best of times. SURF is having discussions with Scottish Government colleagues on how it can do even more to help to connect varied perspectives, roles, resources, information sources and capacities. The primary shared aim is to support resilience in Scotland's most disadvantaged and disconnected places.

We hope that, with the support of our members and networks, SURF can play an important role in promoting fundamental shared interests and practical transferable learning, in a way that will help the more resilient, inclusive and successful Scotland, that we all desire, to emerge from what will inevitably be a highly challenging experience for us all.

End of SURF response | May 2020