



SURF's Scottish Election Question Time 15th April 2021 | Event Report

Introduction

On 15 April 2021, SURF held an online hustings event with representatives of the main political parties and an audience of over 60 individuals from across the SURF network. This is a summary of the event.

The event was based on the outcomes of SURF's [2021 Manifesto for Community Regeneration](#), which was developed inclusively over a nine month period of intense consultation activity in 2020/21. Consultation were carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic in the form of telephone interviews, video discussions and email exchanges with key SURF members in particular sectors, and desk-based research that drew out learning outcomes from recent SURF events and projects, and appropriate policy recommendations from relevant independent reports.

Participants in the [2020 SURF Annual Conference](#) also had the opportunity to discuss and vote on emerging messages. The 2021 Manifesto was presented to Scotland's main political parties in early

2021 to inform their internal policy manifesto development processes in the run-up to the May 2021 Scottish Parliament elections.

The Manifesto presented ten key policy recommendations centred on Climate Change, Land Use and Ownership, Place-based Collaboration and Transport. It can be found [here](#).

Event Summary

SURF Vice Chair Brian MacDonald opened the event with a brief introduction outlining the format of the hustings and highlighting its importance in promoting political engagement on regeneration issues and creating a valuable space for dialogue between the SURF network and the political parties. SURF's Policy Manager Derek Rankine then gave an overview of the SURF 2021 Manifesto consultation process and its main outcomes and policy recommendations.

Opening Statements

Each party representative was invited to speak for five minutes, outlining their main policies and regeneration priorities.

Sarah Boyack, representing **Scottish Labour**, spoke first. She emphasised the need to rebuild from the pandemic by using existing resources more effectively while also channelling new investment towards communities, with particular focus on housing and transport, and the overarching need to combat the climate emergency.

Sarah highlighted increasing levels of unemployment resulting from the pandemic, particularly amongst women and in the hospitality industry, and outlined her party's Jobs Recovery Plan. She stated this would use the powers the Scottish Government has over public procurement to create new, secure, jobs paying the living wage, and create a pipeline of green investment, while ensuring that all companies bidding for public contracts were working to reduce their emissions.



Sarah Boyack MSP, Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, participated on behalf of the Scottish Labour Party

Town centre regeneration was also a priority for Labour, in the context of the decline in retail accelerating severely due to the pandemic. Sarah argued that use of compulsory purchase and sale orders should be central to ensuring that long-term vacancy doesn't reach critical levels. Lastly, on transport, Sarah stated that their priority was for the whole of Scotland to have access to affordable local authority run bus services, like those run by Lothian Busses in Edinburgh.



The Scottish Conservative Party's representative was Maurice Golden MSP, Shadow Cabinet Secretary for the Economy, Fair Work and Culture

Maurice Golden spoke for the **Conservative Party**. His main focus was on localism. He argued that variation between communities should be viewed as a national strength rather than a weakness. Maurice stated that communities were being left behind by increasing centralisation and cuts to local authority budgets, and

called for the fair funding of services under local control.

If elected, he stated the Conservatives would advance a new Communities Bill, ensuring that local authorities received a fixed percentage grant relative to the Scottish Government's funding through the Barnett Formula. Local control over planning is another policy priority, with the party pledging to remove the Scottish Government's ability to overturn local planning decisions.

Other Conservative manifesto pledges Maurice highlighted were; the creation of a rural housing fund; building 60,000 new homes, two thirds of them for social rent); the passing of a Circular Economy Bill; and more expansive use of public procurement to create green jobs.

Patrick Harvie from the **Scottish Green Party** highlighted the toll the pandemic had taken on the country, but noted the opportunities that the current moment presented, and the growing consensus around the need for an investment led recovery.



Patrick Harvie MSP, Party Co-Leader, participated on behalf of the Scottish Green Party

He said the Greens' priorities included: the continued development of renewables; more funding for public transport and active travel; to provide warmer homes; and to fight the destruction of the natural world. He believed these interventions could lay the foundations for a sustainable post-oil economy in Scotland, with nature restoration presenting an area of particular opportunity, with the potential to create good quality jobs in communities across the country.

Patrick stated that there was a need to think differently about how we use space in our towns and cities, with the changing nature of work and the decline of retail. He argued that new taxes and exemptions would encourage the productive use of land and buildings, ensuring that the physical environment does not deteriorate, damaging the wider community.



The Scottish Liberal Democrats' Housing Spokesperson and Vice-Convenor Paul McGarry contributed to the debate

Paul McGarry spoke for the **Liberal Democrats**. He highlighted the centrality of housing to physical and mental health. In light of this, Paul said that retrofitting older, and more recently built, housing stock was a priority for his party, creating good jobs for younger people across the country.

He shared that the Liberal Democrats' manifesto contained new proposals on land reform, a brownfield first development policy, and commitments to encourage the creation of 20 minute

neighbourhoods. Paul highlighted his own housing estate in East Kilbride, where 2000 homes have been built with no community centre, shops or schools within walking distance. He stressed the need for national policy to be implemented more effectively at the local authority and community levels, with adequate funding to deliver on encouraging ideas and rhetoric.

Kevin Stewart, representing the **Scottish National Party**, spoke last. He began by paying tribute to outgoing SURF Chief Executive Andy Milne, and went on to highlight the impact of the Scottish Government's community empowerment legislation so far, arguing that communities were often best-placed to deal with the problems facing them. He highlighted a commitment to further progress this through a review of the Community Empowerment Act, and additional work to build on its

strengths. Kevin said the SNP have also committed to a new Community Wealth Building Act, to ensure that money does not continue to flow out of poorer communities.



Kevin Stewart MSP, the Scottish Government Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning, represented the SNP in SURF's debate

Kevin said that the last Parliament term had demonstrated a high emphasis on housing supply, and that a new SNP Government would maintain this by delivering 100,000 homes between now and 2031. He also shared a commitment to improve the condition of existing housing, through the creation of a national housing standard in legislation.

He added that meeting climate change targets was a key priority for the party, with £1.2bn invested in infrastructure and support to ensure that this does not result in more people sinking into fuel poverty. Concurrently, he said there would be a drive to create secure jobs, with a £500m allocation to support new jobs and training in the green economy.

Questions & Answers

Following the speakers opening remarks the event was opened to questions from the audience. The first came from David Somerville (Cohousing Scotland), who asked what role there was for community-led housing in the candidates' plans for housing.



Cohousing Scotland Trustee David Somerville asked the panel about support for community led housing

All candidates were positive about the role cohousing could play in meeting housing need. **Patrick Harvie** stated that encouraging more co-housing and diversifying land ownership were essential to strengthening communities, and that housing was about far more than big numbers delivered by volume house builders. **Kevin Stewart** highlighted a recent development in Alexandria, noting that the best housing and places were being created with the close involvement of communities.

Paul McGarry stated that, post-COVID, there needs to be a shift in how land for housing was allocated, to enable cohousing to become normalised. **Sarah Boyack** believed there was a clear need for all communities, including students, to be able to engage on how housing was built and managed. Lastly, **Maurice Golden** noted the importance of building social infrastructure alongside housing, which was critical to creating communities rather than just homes.

The next question came from Ian Manson (Clyde Gateway), who asked what the parties would do to reduce health inequalities. Ian said the breadth of existing health inequalities have been starkly exposed during the pandemic.

In response, **Kevin Stewart** emphasised the need to listen to communities and be brave in setting budgets, highlighting an example from his constituency in Middlefield in Aberdeen, where the local community's input led to an increase in spending on mental health services over more conventional areas of public health. **Sarah Boyack** highlighted gaps in attainment in education, arguing that getting people into secure employment was the best way to reduce inequalities of all kinds. **Maurice Golden** said action is required to improve access to healthy food and improve people's cooking skills, ensuring that adequate community infrastructure was in place to support people to make healthier

choices. He also highlighted the issue of drug deaths, which he said are the highest in Europe, and should be a priority for the next parliament.

Paul McGarry highlighted the importance of good quality housing to health, and said there has been a steep rise in mental health waiting lists. He argued that health services should be based within the communities they serve. **Patrick Harvie** believed that, despite the good intentions, individual policies and interventions are not going to resolve the issue. He argued that health inequalities are fundamentally about the economic structure of the country, and could only be reduced through fairer distribution of wealth.

The next question was from Alistair Moodie (Lochgoil Community Council). He asked what the parties would do to resolve the imbalance of power between central government and local government.

Maurice Golden restated the Conservatives' commitment to removing the Scottish Government's power to overrule local planning decisions. He said this change would protect green spaces and back communities that are in conflict against developers. **Patrick Harvie** argued that there needs to be strong cooperation between local and national government, as well as more democracy in the planning system. He raised the Greens' support for a new fiscal framework for local authorities, with more local tax powers. **Sarah Boyack** highlighted similar issues, arguing that despite the recent Planning (Scotland) Act and promises by the SNP to reform Council Tax, there was still much to be done in this area.

Paul McGarry believed that local issues were often ignored by central government, referring to a recent case concerning a waste incinerator in his local area. Paul also highlighted concerns about Councillors being allowed to receive donations from housing developers. **Kevin Stewart** responded by noting recent Parliamentary reviews had shown that many local Councillors were not aware of all the powers that they hold. He said that as Planning Minister, he is clear that the system has to strike a balance between sustainable development and community views – noting that many vital developments, including children's homes, traveller sites and asylum housing, would not be built without the intervention of planning reporters.

The final question came from Gavin Thomson (Friends of the Earth Scotland) asked what the parties would do to make '20 minute neighbourhoods' a reality. He said one particularly challenging barrier would be reducing car dependency against a backdrop of local authority cuts.

All candidates welcomed the idea of 20 minute neighbourhoods in principle. **Maurice Golden** and **Paul McGarry** highlighted the need to retrofit housing developments built without adequate infrastructure. Paul said more action was needed to ensure that developers delivered on promises made during the planning process.

Sarah Boyack raised the issue of gender inequalities in transport, and said there was a need for significant investment in public transport and active travel to make 20 minute neighbourhoods a reality. **Kevin Stewart** said new powers have been given to communities to produce Local Place Plans, and that listening to communities was central to designing successful, sustainable places. **Patrick Harvie** focused on transport, arguing that present policies were failing to reduce car use and that more funding should be given to local authorities to deliver on local public transport priorities.



Friends of the Earth Scotland's Air Pollution Campaigner, Gavin Thomson, asked about how the parties would go about creating '20 minute neighbourhoods'

Due to the number of candidates and time constraints, it was not possible to take more questions from the audience. Other questions posed in the event chat included:

- What would the parties propose to encourage the re-use of existing (particularly historic) buildings?
- What would the representatives do to encourage reuse and repair in Scotland?
- How can we ensure adequate provision of banking services and cash machines in deprived areas?
- How can you help communities that are concerned by proposed housing developments because local schools are at full capacity?
- How do you see challenges around poor condition of town centre buildings addressed in the immediate future, especially those in private ownership?
- Why do we have building standards that are not fit for the climate emergency?
- Why do Local Development Plans not include a joined-up strategy for infrastructure needs?
- How can property owners be encouraged to bring their vacant property back into active use, rather than investing in new build?

Summing Up

The party representatives were given two minutes to provide a short closing statement.

Kevin Stewart referred to the need to decarbonise the economy, and the SNP's commitment to creating secure employment in green industries. Kevin also reiterated SNP commitments to build new homes and extending community empowerment legislation.

Paul McGarry spoke about school overcrowding and the need to build adequate community infrastructure alongside new housing developments.

Patrick Harvie raised the prospects for a WW2-style investment led recovery, calling for further wealth taxes to help build a fairer and greener society.

Maurice Golden highlighted the Conservatives' commitment to a Circular Economy Bill. He argued that present policy in this area was failing to deliver adequate levels of re-use and recycling.

Sarah Boyack believed that the next Scottish Parliament term should prioritise a green recovery from COVID. Sarah noted that there were lots of points of agreement between the parties and an opportunity to turn this into a radical Parliament which delivered adequate investment.

SURF Vice Chair Brian MacDonald brought the event to a close and thanked the politicians and audience for taking part.

What's Next?

SURF will be working with a number of policy development forums, partner organisations and Scottish Parliament Committees and Cross Party Groups to further promote the policy recommendations that emerged from our [2021 Manifesto](#). This will feed into our upcoming [programme of events](#) and a new [20 Minute Neighbourhood Practice Network](#) that we are developing with the Scottish Government.

End of event report

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