



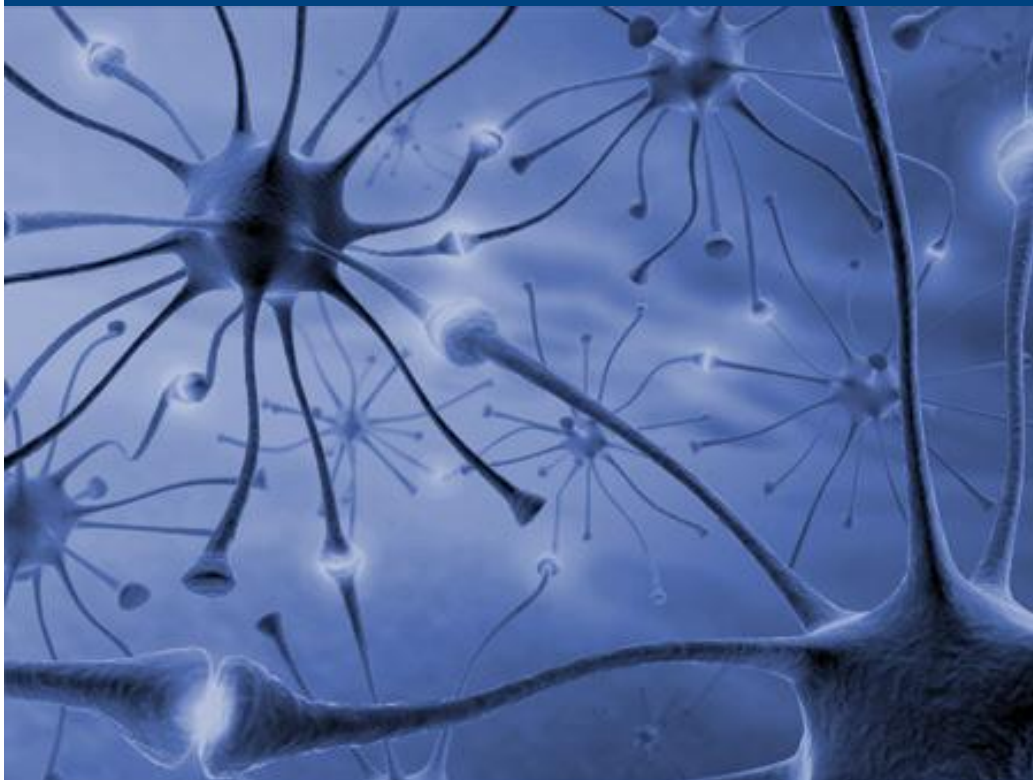
**SURF**  
Scotland's Regeneration Forum

SURF : sharing experience : shaping practice

# **SURF's Alliance for Action: The Shared Learning Benefits**



**SURF Alliance for Action**



**This document sets out the practical learning benefits to cross sector participants and the wider community from SURF's Alliance for Action active, cross sector collaboration.**

**A link to the SURF website, which has information about other kinds of outcomes from the broader Alliance for Action processes, is provided at the end of this paper.**

# SURF's Alliance for Action: Learning and Sharing

*A report by SURF – Scotland's Regeneration Forum*

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## Some Background on SURF's Alliance for Action

**SURF set up its *Alliance for Action* against the background of the extended recessionary context of 2013. It did so to assist the delivery of successful and sustainable regeneration in the face of rising demands and reduced resources. The *Alliance* uses SURF's knowledge and networks to actively link local assets and initiatives in specific disadvantaged communities with relevant national policy and resources. It has done so to support better outcomes in those areas, while testing and enhancing shared understanding of the realistic possibilities for cross sector community regeneration in a challenging economic context. To that end, the *Alliance* has both supported and linked investments in, and, learning from, place focused, cross sector collaborations.**

The *Alliance* initiative was set up in cooperation with the Scottish Government and relevant Local Authorities. These key partners share SURF's aim of more effectively engaging and developing national economic and social policy, based on the reality of practice at the local level.

Over three years, the *Alliance* has creatively connected people, policies and resources in support of; more sustainable places, greater empowerment, increased enterprise, intelligent public sector reform, and greater local benefit from infrastructure and procurement investments. A key point of focus for collaboration has been on engaging dynamic community based initiatives with cross sector aspirations for reducing poverty and inequality, while generating new and inclusive growth in Scotland's most disadvantaged communities.

**The dual purpose of SURF's *Alliance for Action* is:**

- **to strengthen resilience and practical outcomes in the programme's case study communities (currently: Govan, Glasgow; East Kirkcaldy, Fife and; Rothesay, Bute)**
- **to enhance wider policy and resource considerations for supporting community regeneration in the continuing challenging context.**

***SURF's Alliance* initiative simultaneously enhances the delivery of practical regeneration benefits to communities, while identifying, connecting and disseminating relevant learning from that process. That reality based, cross sector, learning is shared and debated between the sites and across SURF's national regeneration networks and wider contacts.**

## How We Capture and Share Learning

A key activity of the *Alliance* programme is collecting, recording and sharing useful learning. To do so, SURF engages its extensive local and national networks of active individuals and organisations. These include those living and working in the case study communities, as well as national and regional funders and policy makers. As an informed and connected neutral observer SURF is able to:

- Study and support local initiatives
- Identify and record the skills, knowledge and experience of people living and working in case study communities
- Collate and present local knowledge to a wider audience
- Encourage individuals and communities to recognise and link the value of their own contributions by placing local learning in a broader context.
- Organise events and activities which encourage productive engagement between and across SURF's local and national networks of individuals and organisations.
- Facilitate mutually beneficial meetings between policymakers and funders and the individuals and communities which are directly affected by decisions they make.
- Record knowledge and learning in a variety of accessible media to suit different audiences.

## Who Benefits?

The capturing and dissemination of practical learning, empowers individuals and communities and actively engages SURF partners. In doing so, it helps to inform local and national policy decisions and associated resource allocations.

The *Alliance* delivers tangible results by creatively and intelligently connecting investors and other supportive resources directly into active communities, and to each other.<sup>1</sup> In that process, it produces substantial additional benefits in the form of increased knowledge, understanding and cooperation.

The rest of this paper sets out the learning benefits which the SURF *Alliance for Action* process achieves for four groups of essential partners in community regeneration. They are:

- **Local people and communities;**
- **Participating SURF *Alliance* partner organisations;**
- **Local authorities;**
- **The Scottish Government**

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the *Alliance* facilitates regular shared learning sessions for SURF partners and people living and working in *Alliance* communities. A report on recent sessions available on <http://www.scotregen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Final-2015-shared-learning-event-report-1.pdf>

# 1 Local people and communities

## 1.1 Participation

People living and working in the *Alliance* case study areas participate in SURF's varied, relevant and inclusive events and activities. These include:

- Introductory and developmental, community based sessions, for sharing cross sector knowledge and perspectives; building networks and agreeing shared priorities;
- Hosting fact finding visits from senior Scottish Government civil servants and politicians;
- Thematic, cross-community, shared learning events;
- *Alliance for Action* supported community engagement activities (including cooperation with local authority initiated consultative or capacity building exercises).

## 1.2 Building confidence and knowledge

*Alliance* initiatives produce various direct benefits, (*see 1.5*) but participants also report the following important indirect benefits:

- Participants describe *Alliance* initiatives as valuable and educational. Volunteers reported viewing their own contributions in a much broader context and feeling more empowered as a result. Participants from the communities also report enhanced confidence that their views have significant value and are being heard by those who have some influence over decisions taken about their communities.
- Practically useful and mutually supportive relationships are established between individuals facing similar challenges in diverse communities across different geographical locations.
- These connections enable individuals and groups to learn from each other and to develop their own relevant knowledge and skills.
- The communities have discovered common ground and exchanged experiential learning, examples of best practice and perspectives on common challenges and opportunities.

***“We were encouraged to voice our opinions and we felt like we were heard and listened to.”***

*Participant in Alliance shared learning event, Govan*

## 1.3 Broadening understanding

Several times each year, the *Alliance* facilitates shared learning visits to the case study areas. These can take the form of a group 'site' visit with civil servants, politicians or funders (or all three) looking for opportunities to engage directly with those who live and work in a community. The main purpose may be to view existing policy in practice, or to gain knowledge that can inform future policy and investments. The formats of such visits range from semi-formal events with clear programmes and timetables to meet specific requests, or more informal visits by individual officials and politicians who are interested in learning about a particular geographic, demographic or policy area.

SURF always structures the visits with the intention of also benefiting the host community – in particular, ensuring that all participants will feel adequately informed of the context and comfortable in their valued role, especially those who are not participating as ‘paid professionals’ but who give their time voluntarily.

In contrast, some of those ‘non-professionals’ have expressed scepticism about the benefits of taking part in previous (non-SURF) events which were set-up to enable funders and or ‘experts’ to meet ‘real people’ as perceived beneficiaries of their decisions.

***“I don’t want to be trotted out like some kind example of ‘a poor person’ so that I can tell my ‘story’ and be patronised or have to act as though I am so grateful.”***

*Gallatown resident hosting Alliance visit*

The interdependent equality of the *Alliance* supports an environment where genuinely reciprocal learning is possible. This is because time has been spent enhancing mutual understanding of views and capacities around shared interests

and priorities between individuals and projects within these communities. SURF provides the key role of an informed honest broker, without the baggage sometimes associated with external or even local agencies.

#### 1.4 Valuing local knowledge

Reports of these events are written in a way which gives weight to the expertise, knowledge and skills of everyone involved. The reports particularly acknowledge that those who live and work in communities are likely to be the real ‘experts’ on local circumstances and what is required to bring about positive change.

So, while community members who participate in the *Alliance* may acquire useful information and access to resources, they are simultaneously encouraged to appreciate the value of their own contributions and their further potential to influence future outcomes. *Alliance* work in each community is based on the community’s own thematic priorities. Effectively engaging local people and organisations from the outset in the joint effort to identify each community’s unique needs and assets, ensures an increased ownership of, and commitment to, the shared challenges that follow.

#### 1.5 Practical Benefits

The *Alliance* has also been able to support practical, learning outcomes for local individuals and organisations. For example, in its participatory budgeting partnership work with Creative Scotland, the *Alliance* facilitated funding support for thirteen new or enhanced creative community projects. These now involve more than 100 individuals regularly participating in a variety of activities which support the learning of different skills, while building confidence and wellbeing.

Community project workers also report direct benefits from connections made through SURF and the *Alliance*, accessing resources and funding and being able to form valuable partnerships with other projects.

## 1.6 Shared Learning

*Alliance* support for professional (paid) workers in communities, volunteer workers and those participating in community activities, brings direct benefits in terms of shared learning exchanges across communities. It also provides opportunities to make productive connections with relevant funders and policy makers.

The *Alliance* engages with specific geographic communities. The boundaries are defined by locally understood place perceptions and administrative structures (the specific boundaries can be flexible in response to evolving demands). However, as with all communities, they are made up of diverse individuals, and groups of common interest, who live and work within the case study areas. The benefits which the *Alliance* brings for individuals has a powerful, positive knock-on impact on the wider community.

## 2 SURF and *Alliance* partners and contacts

Underpinning the *Alliance* is the process of identifying, creating and enhancing mutually beneficial links. The *Alliance* undertakes to make and improve connections:

- Between existing agencies within each case study community
- Between people and organisations across the different case study communities
- Between the *Alliance* communities and useful external national organisations, including funders and policy influencers.

### 2.1 Meaningful connections and cross sector support

SURF has an extensive membership and a network of agencies and contacts involved in regeneration across Scotland. Based on their own policy priorities for enhanced cross sector collaboration and investment impact, many of those agencies have become actively involved in the work of SURF's *Alliance for Action*. The range of national agency *Alliance* partners includes academics, funding agencies, and public and third sector organisations. The benefits for the *Alliance* partners include:

- Participation in open forum events to promote wider awareness and to share/debate *Alliance* learning with colleagues across all sectors and geographies;
- Finding partner connections that can help them respond rapidly and effectively to crisis through informal channels;
- A platform to present important work directly to policy influencers;

***"SURF's Alliance for Action has supported us to connect with other local organisations to develop a community charter with the aim of organisations being openly accountable to the community."***

*Community project worker, Govan*

- An opportunity for smaller agencies to have their voices heard more clearly by those who can make a bigger difference;
- The chance for ‘outside’ actors to connect to the heart of communities in an informed and coordinated context;
- Genuine feedback on research or funding ideas from those best placed to supply practical advice and information;
- An opportunity to constructively engage in challenging resource and policy decisions with those who make them;
- Access to practical and insightful *Alliance* activity reports and analysis;

## 2.2 Cutting across sectors – and through red tape

The need for enhanced partnership and collaborative working, in what are set to be increasingly challenging circumstances for community regeneration in the most deprived communities, underpins all of SURF and *Alliance* activities.

Early in the *Alliance* process, SURF established a selected pool of relevant colleagues to support and help direct SURF’s innovative *Alliance* work. The membership of the APPP (Academic, Policy and Practice Panel) reflects the strength and diversity of the *Alliance* and SURF’s broad and supportive membership and network.

This healthy mix of perspectives, experience and knowledge means that *Alliance* activities and events provide genuine opportunities for informed and productive cross sector collaboration.

As well as enabling funders and policy influencers to access first-hand knowledge of the true nature of challenges faced by disadvantaged communities, the direct connections made through the *Alliance* can promote prompt and accurate responses to requests for information and support. This can reduce lengthy bureaucratic procedures - especially useful when addressing a short term crisis.<sup>2</sup>

***“SURF's Alliance for Action has taken a proactive approach across Govan, raising the area's profile to national agencies and ensuring that the regeneration taking place is celebrated and does not go unrecognised. SURF's work in Govan has also introduced innovative ways of working and encouraged local organisations to work holistically and collaboratively to achieve effective and sustainable regenerative programmes for the local area and importantly for the people who choose to make Govan their home.”***

*Employability project worker, Govan*

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the summer of 2016 saw *Alliance* connections able to short-circuit red tape and find funding for a respected and effective project which external circumstances had forced into short-term crisis.



## 3 Local Authorities

### 3.1 Enhanced cooperation

The concept and experience of SURF's *Alliance* confirms that local authorities should be key partners in any sustained, strategic regeneration initiative. However, relationships between councils and communities can be dogged by historic mistrust based on perceived neglect or broken promises. The SURF facilitated *Alliance* enables the establishment, or re-establishment, of a practical working relationship with all parties involved. SURF's essential early intelligence and diplomatic efforts promote the mutual benefits of pragmatic collaboration and cooperation in the face of considerable shared challenges.

### 3.2 Local support, national promotion

Active participation as *Alliance* partners brings particular benefits to local authorities. These include opportunities to:

- Exploit the SURF 'honest broker' role as an effective medium for rebuilding mutual understanding, thereby engendering greater levels of trust and practical cooperation;
- Access additional intelligence, objective advice and extra resources
- Participate in independently supported consultation towards a community-supported vision;
- Share the responsibility of supporting challenged communities with other local and national partners;
- Attract enhanced investment and other resources from external national agencies;
- Be viewed by communities as collaborative partners for change - rather than as directive, top down enforcers;
- Have their local examples of good practice recognised and disseminated to a wider audience;
- Raise community regeneration challenges and local authority responses on a Scottish stage.

### 3.3 Shared priorities

As a respected external agency, SURF enables local actors and local authority representatives to engage

***“Working with SURF – it’s raised our profile. People on the outside have heard about us and know what we’re doing”***

*Local Authority Officer, Fife Council*

or re-engage on more 'equal' terms. It facilitates realistic but constructive discussion towards a shared vision and the development of a coherent set of priorities and desired outcomes - the kind of discussion which may have previously been hindered by historical suspicion or grievances.

In that role, SURF has had considerable success in bringing previously

disconnected, or, even antagonist, parties into constructive discussion around the same table.

### 3.4 Flexible approaches

In the three current *Alliance* case study areas, initial engagement with local authorities was varied to suit the local context. One local authority initiated *Alliance* involvement by inviting SURF in to help it address its aspirations for more interaction with local partners; in another the *Alliance* was initially pragmatically developed ‘under the radar’ of the relevant council; and in the third, a politically pressurised council initially required some reassurance to commit to the collaborative process.

The way in which those discrete relationships have successfully evolved, illustrates the important flexibility in the *Alliance*, in adapting to different and sometimes shifting local circumstances.

All three of the local authorities are now enthusiastic *Alliance* partners. Each now commits resources and/or funding to support the further development of the local *Alliance*. They all readily acknowledge the benefits that

***As an Alliance for Action partner, we feel part of the policy process and the shared learning events increase our understanding of the communities ... [we] ... wish to support”***

*National social Investment funder, Glasgow*

collaboration as an *Alliance* partner has brought to the community of focus and to their own role within it, as well as the Council’s positive profile to a wider audience.

## 4 The Scottish Government

SURF successfully developed the concept and delivery of its *Alliance for Action* programme via policy and investment support provided by Scottish Government. While SURF’s original 2011 post economic crash Reality, Resources, and Resilience research was carried out with support from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Scottish Government, and latterly Highlands & Islands Enterprise, have provided vital investment in the delivery of the process and the expansion of the programme range to its current stage.

### 4.1 Informing policy, community access, and learning connections

As a key partner and investor, the Scottish Government receives regular formal reports and updates on the *Alliance* progress. These provide valuable policy and practice insights, as well as examples of transferrable learning from the collaborative *Alliance* model of regeneration. Scottish Government colleagues also benefit from informal and unmediated access to the realities of the cross sector policy and practice interface in *Alliance* communities.

The *Alliance* informs regeneration research by its application in a contrasting range of communities across different scales, geographies and settings. SURF’s role as a respected and informed outsider, helps to build a realistic, trust-based relationship with the community; and enables relevant Scottish Government colleagues to be partners in the development of genuine community led/inspired and place based regeneration.

As well as providing an enhanced flow of transferrable learning – the *Alliance* is, crucially, able to respond to specific requests for targeted information for informing particular areas of policy inquiry. Because the

*Alliance* combines place-based work with an awareness of, and engagement with, the evolving national policy context, it is able to identify local developments or activities which can be quickly and usefully fed into current policy considerations.<sup>3</sup>

The Scottish Government's positive role in supporting the *Alliance* approach is promoted by SURF to a wide audience through Scottish, UK and European policy forums, journals, publications and conferences – as well as within the case study communities and among SURF's broad-based network and partner organisations.

The *Alliance* learning process is built on a foundation of original and revisited baseline interviews with key participants. These written and filmed records provide accounts of evolving perspectives on aims, partnerships, plans, capacity and empowerment.

Scottish Government Ministers and civil servants participate in regular visits to *Alliance* communities, providing opportunities to:

- observe the effects of enacted policy and resource investments – and to discuss impact and outcomes with those whose lives are affected;
- participate directly in local activities and events;
- enjoy unmediated, informal conversations with project workers, volunteers and participants.

Scottish Government Ministers and civil servants also regularly participate in national SURF events such as SURF Awards ceremonies and Annual Conferences. Cross sector *Alliance* shared learning initiatives, and related follow up 'Chattam House Rule' gatherings, provide the opportunity for informal and frank networking conversations with colleagues engaged in relevant regeneration fields and activities.

## 4.2 Informing public sector reform

In collaboration with the Scottish Government and in support of its policy concerns, the *Alliance* has evolved to provide greater and more formal active partnership with the relevant local authorities involved. A shared focus on the timely opportunity to develop policy and practice in reforming public services has come to the fore.

The Scottish Government, local authorities and SURF partners are jointly engaged in using the practical and learning basis of the place specific *Alliance* to:

- inform realistic policy and effective practice in the linked fields of community capacity, empowerment, ownership and enterprise.
- promote productive contributions to local and national inclusive growth
- link practical learning outcomes into wider local authority strategic challenges and the Fairer Scotland agenda.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, SURF has most recently been in a position to supply on the ground reaction to specific policy discussions on participatory budgeting and exit strategies for place-based initiatives

## Conclusion

This report has identified the varied processes by which the *Alliance* captures and records learning and the ways in which that learning is packaged and presented to be of use to a broad and diverse audience.

This report demonstrates that *Alliance* communities and partners contribute to – and benefit from – the learning which accrues through SURF's initiative and which can be used to support funding and resource applications and allocations and to inform policy decisions.

SURF is encouraged by the significant practical successes within the local *Alliance* sites and the quality of the experiential learning emerging. SURF is keen to further capitalise on the evident links between the focus of its *Alliance* activities and the synergies with emergent Scottish Government policies on public sector reform, welfare reform, inclusive growth, decentralisation, fairness and the continuing priority of tackling poverty and inequality as the root causes of degeneration.

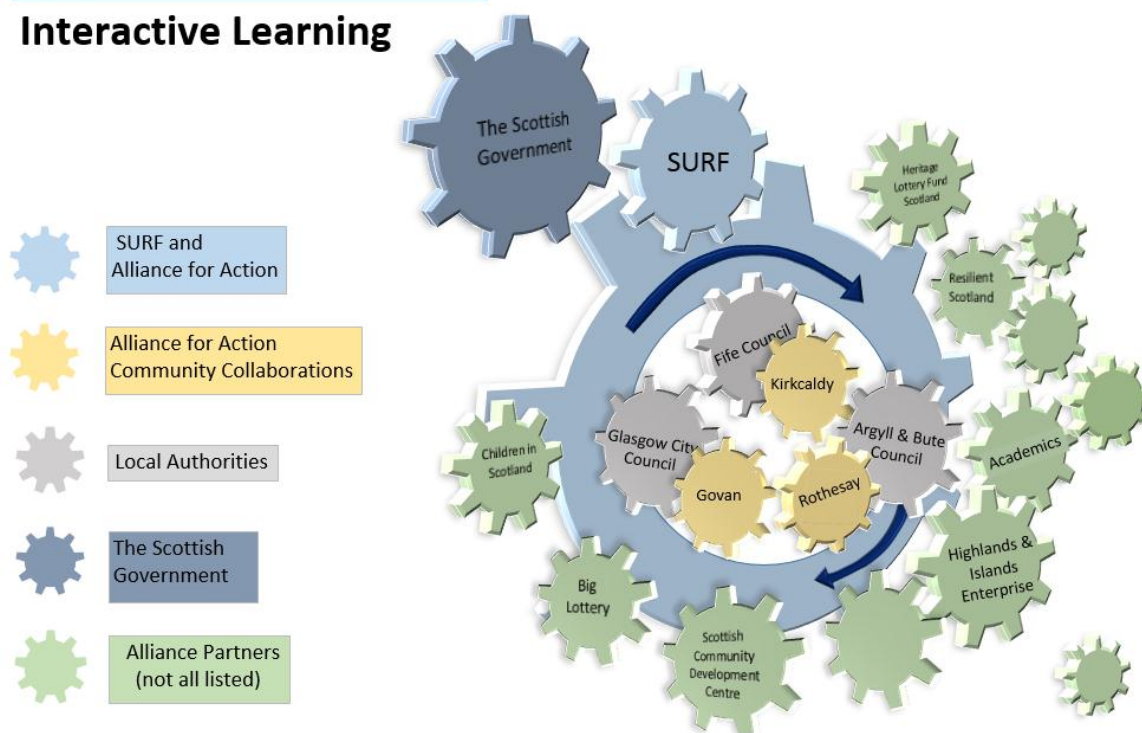
SURF appreciates all of the enthusiastic local, national and international support and interest it has received so far on its *Alliance for Action* initiative and the learning emerging from it.

At the time of writing, SURF is cooperating with the Scottish Government, and with other partner agencies, on expanding the range and depth of its successful *Alliance for Action* programme.

*More information on additional outcomes from the Alliance for Action – including details of partners, process, structure, reports, films and practical outcomes- is available at the SURF website: [www.scotregen.co.uk/projects/Alliance-for-action/](http://www.scotregen.co.uk/projects/Alliance-for-action/)*



### Interactive Learning



## SURF's wider role and activities

As Scotland's regeneration forum, SURF draws on its extensive, cross-sector membership of over 250 organisations to share knowledge, ideas and experience in community regeneration.

Constructive feedback from SURF's varied interactions with its membership, networks and wider contacts is used to influence the development of more successful regeneration policy and practice. This is achieved principally through SURF's close links with key policy-makers in national and local government and other relevant agencies.

The diagram in Appendix 1 illustrates the Alliance for Action as one of four complementary strands in SURF's coordinated work programme.

*More information on SURF and its wider work programme is available at: [www.scotregen.co.uk](http://www.scotregen.co.uk)*

### End of Report

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Appendix 1

