



SURF
Scotland's Regeneration Network

SURF : sharing experience : shaping practice

A MORE 'CIVIC SCOTLAND' – WHAT, WHO AND HOW



A SURF Food for Thought discussion dinner

Thursday 21st April 2016, 7pm -9:30pm
Calistoga Restaurant, 70 Rose Street Lane North, Edinburgh

Context

In all of its work, SURF strives to support more **cross sector cooperation** on widely shared aspirations for a **fairer and more successful Scotland**. Non statutory civic organisations, and their umbrella bodies, are important players in promoting and delivering those aims. They do so at local, regional and national levels, as well as across thematic communities of interest.

From across its networks, SURF picked up on widespread interest in the present reality and further potential of 'Civic Scotland' in local and national regeneration efforts. It therefore decided to use its '**Food For Thought**' policy discussion format to convene a 'Chatham House Rule' discussion, at which a set of relevant, senior contacts could informally, frankly and constructively consider:

- **The evolving context, role, nature and structures of 'Civic Scotland'**
- **What can be done towards ensuring the best operating climate in which Civic Scotland can do more to help deliver shared aims for a fairer and more successful Scotland?**
- **What are the practical options for improving cooperation and effectiveness across the relevant players, structures, policies and resources.**

That discussion took place in Edinburgh on the evening of 21.4.16. It involved 16 individuals with relevant experience and senior responsibilities in national government, third sector support and resource bodies, academia, consultancy, policy/practice development and community based practice.

What follows is a record of some of the varied observations and proposals that emerged from the lively discussion. In summarising what was by design, a diverse exchange of views and perspectives on generally shared interests; the points listed are constructive but not all in mutual agreement. Similarly, some statements reflect value based opinions rather than evidence based facts.

Nonetheless, we hope this short paper will be of interest, and potentially of some use in stimulating wider consideration of shared challenges and practical responses towards 'A More Civic Scotland'. That is an aim which SURF is keen to continue to work towards with willing partners from across our various networks and beyond.

Centripetal Forces

- The pre 1999 aspirations for an interactive Scottish Parliament, both bolstered and overseen by broad and diverse civic engagement, have not been sustained in reality.
- Despite the stated commitment to diverse civic engagement and well-articulated reports such as Christie and The Enabling State, followed by the introduction of enabling policy; decision making and resource allocation in the first decades under the Scottish Parliament have been characterised by a centralising drift in practice.
- What could we have done differently and what might still be done?

Historical Reflection

- The post war social settlement established the national model of broad based, centrally planned health and social security. Efforts to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of this model followed over successive decades. It has come under greater pressure in recent years

with technical and cultural shifts which have raised demands and expectations for choices. Is iterative improvement still the most sensible approach, or is there now seen to be a fundamental flaw in the original concept?

- The present political/policy circumstances in Scotland appear to present an opportunity to try a different approach. Christie was an attempt to do so. Despite reasonable reservations, it still represents a coherent and broadly shared platform of consensus. However, the report was much stronger on 'what' than 'how'.

Reasons to be cheerful

- For practical inspiration, there is a wealth of historical and current examples of tangible and substantial success in community enterprise – especially in the model and delivery of community based housing associations in Scotland.
- There is also a reasonable framework of supportive infrastructure and some resources of scale aimed at improving the range and quality of civic activity – e.g. the enhanced focus on scale and place following a recent change of strategic direction by the Big Lottery in Scotland.

And less so

- Despite some examples of encouraging experience and much supportive rhetoric, most (poor urban) communities remain conditioned to seek permission before acting, rather than assuming their own innate entitlement/empowerment.
- Too much is asked of poor communities where many residents are focused on just trying to feed their families and heat their homes. If we expect them respond pro-actively, we need to first get existing basic public services right and then offer accessible opportunities to build from that foundation. I.E. the priority is not 'reform' but the better functioning of existing public services.
- Communities themselves are often divided - but the formal and statutory Community Council structure is there to be built on. However, it is currently woefully under resourced in terms of practical and financial support, as well as meaningful responsibilities.

Trusting Relationships

- It is the level of civic trust in the state that determines the quality of the interactive relationship, which in turn sets the acceptability of higher taxes for more extensive public services.
- A high level of civic trust is still presently evident in individual relationships with nurses, teachers and social workers. The relative breakdown occurs at the citizen/official organization interface, with generally sceptical (and arguably misunderstood) perceptions of councils, government agencies etc.
- As is widely acknowledged, the gap between citizens and formal council structures in Scotland (as in the rest of the UK) is just too big to sustain the bonds of identity, belonging and communality that are essential for adequate trust – especially under pressure at both ends. However, there has been insufficient leadership and practical work done in recent decades to build sufficiently broad public support for change towards more councils and elections – rather than less. The dominantly reactionary role of the mainstream media is a significant factor of inertia in that regard.
- Too many attempts at structural change end up over schedule and beyond budget. They most often serve as diversionary activity which fails to deliver - except in the form of additional remuneration for high level managers and external consultants/lawyers etc. This only feeds cynicism and further erodes broad civic trust, resources and enterprise.

Complexity and Tactics

- The breadth and complexity of the concept of broad based reform or restructuring tends to be disabling. We should select our targets of focused effort intelligently, with a view to demonstrating success and inspiring further possibilities and collaborations.
- Influencing by example, based on authentic knowledge and practical experience, will be more productive than high level broad based structural reform. There are many existing examples of successful energetic communitarianism that can be highlighted and built upon.
- We should contest polarising, puritanical perspectives of instinctive centralism on one hand or total devolution to communities on the other. In doing so, we should more actively consider, consult on and argue for what is best planned managed and resourced at what different level and in what appropriate format.

Persuasion for Prevention

- While many would agree that some sacred cows need to go, there is little current public willingness to accept changes to their own existing services that in order to invest in improvements upstream – especially in the case of NHS front line provision.
- The third sector could /should be more effective in making the case for prevention.
- Consistently well performing, community based voluntary organisations, providing positive health, economic and social outcomes under short term local authority or health board grant/contracts, should be offered mainstream funding, so that they can demonstrate effective delivery and encourage replication of their approach within the wider public services framework.
- The work of Harry Burns and others has helpfully consolidated shared understanding of important links between the personal sense of control/participation and the health/wellbeing that is essential for further empowerment and enterprise. Such empowerment is essential to challenge inevitable resistance from existing state bureaucracies.

Comfortable Ambiguity

- In practice, it will be necessary to accept differing levels and forms of provision in different places and settings. This is the dreaded 'post code lottery' often cited pejoratively by the media but which already prevails largely uncontested on a class basis. Similarly, all active partners will also have to accept the inevitable ambiguity and messiness in real communities and related structures.
- Town Centres are good settings for assessing reality and evidencing cooperation –not to revisit historical aspirations/nostalgia but to adapt assets and opportunities to meet new realities. At present, many display the symptoms of private sector short termism and poor civic decision making.
- The full and further impacts of social media developments have a substantial time lag in coming to the observable surface. The full picture is yet to be revealed but it will involve a very big shift in operational reality and further potential for transformational change.
- The Community Empowerment Act and widely held enhanced enthusiasms for democratic renewal present encouraging possibilities. However, it is important to balance aspirations for 'hands off' community empowerment with legitimate concerns about accessibility, accountability and the protection of minorities - beware the tyranny of the majority at the expense of diversity and unpopular causes/minorities

Finally, some points for further consideration and action

- How individuals act matters. How **we** act matters; perhaps more so than policy or political parties.
- Be pragmatic. Accept ambiguity. Find willing conspirators and act
- Argue for the benefits of the same 'self-directed care', as is generally accepted in the case of health, in other areas of common concern.
- Stick with investment over the longer term wherever possible. This is essential in the case health and education if anything is to be usefully learned, applied and more widely benefited from via the much desired but rarely realised 'preventative spend'.
- Balance understandable concerns at the expenditure of time and resources on 're-inventing the wheel' against the necessity of adapting it for best use under substantially changed operating context, circumstances and influences.
- Consider how we can more effectively counter/manage the highly reactive role of conventional media and the extent to which it is currently being exploited by powerful lobbying interests, especially those of large scale, private sector contractors.
- Offering choices in public services and tracking user responses could help to inform better planning and delivery.
- Ultimately, the root issues are economic rather than structural. How can we raise awareness of economic policy problems and promote potential alternatives in an accessible and practical way?
- Burn the public finance manual.

SURF is thankful to all of those who gave their time and views in contributing to this discussion and to generally agreeing the above noted points as a reasonable record.

While SURF does not necessarily agree with each individual point listed above, it will seek appropriate opportunities to take forward the main concerns and some specific proposals through its own programmes of work and in collaboration with relevant 'willing conspirators'.

Andy Milne - SURF Chief Executive – 5.5.16

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