![SURF - Scotland's Regeneration Forum logo. SURF : sharing experience : shaping practice](image)

SURF's COVID Sector Connector Service Events Outcomes Paper

About this paper

This is a summary of the **main learning outcomes** from a series of **SURF Cross Sector Connector** online events organised by SURF in October and November, 2020, as part of its **Alliance for Action** response to COVID.

Event background

SURF's Cross Sector Connector (**SCSC**) programme is an expanded version of SURF's successful People and Sector Connector Service, which shared and promoted policy learning across local government. The new service invites participants from a wider range of SURF's partners - including the community, voluntary, public, academic and private sectors.

SCSC sets out to optimise cross sector collaboration in a way that:

- provides socially and economically pressured communities with more holistic support
- identifies common causes, shared challenges and collaborative solutions
- responds to immediate, and longer-term issues created by the pandemic
- records, analyses and presents further learning, assisting communities and relevant policymakers to rebuild better

Event details

More than 120 participants joined SURF's inaugural programme of five regional interactive events focused on COVID learning and future development with an emphasis on **attainable, practical resilience**.

Discussion was based on SURF's own continuing research and learning from its unique cross sector forum of frontline delivery organisations and those national agencies which support them.

Three prioritised themes were selected for discussion from SURF's early COVID reports – *Lessons From the Frontline*[1] and *Building Community Resilience*[2]. Those themes - the **digital divide**; reduced

FIVE REGIONAL EVENTS	
South East North East Central West South West	**South East**: City of Edinburgh, East Lothian, West Lothian, Midlothian, the Scottish Borders **North**: Aberdeenshire, Aberdeen City Council, Argyll and Bute, Highland, Moray, Na h-Eileanan an Iar, Orkney Islands, Shetland Islands **East Central:** Angus, Clackmannanshire, Dundee, Falkirk, Fife, Perth & Kinross, Stirling **West:** East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, Renfrewshire, West Dunbartonshire **South West:** North Ayrshire, North Lanarkshire, South Ayrshire, South Lanarkshire, East Ayrshire, Dumfries & Galloway

red tape around funding; and new **partnership working** - were identified as offering the greatest potential for positive, sustainable change, while reflecting the interests of SURF's broad network and its role as Scotland's regeneration forum.

The key speakers, sharing their COVID experiences and strategies for moving forward, were:

- Katy McNeil, Scottish Government's **Connecting Scotland**
- Karen Dick and Jenny Tipton**, Creative Scotland**
- Leah Black**, WHALE Arts**
- Hannah MacSween, **Muir of Ord DT**
- Pauline Grandison, **Coalfields Regeneration Trust**.
- Andy Gilbert, **Easthall Residents Association**
- Kirsty Fowler, **Ochiltree Community Hub**

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[1] SURF-Covid-19-Key-Messages-Report.pdf
[2] SURF-COVID-2-complete.pdf

Participants joining the interactive exchanges included local community activists and representatives of other sectors, including the NHS, national funders, local authorities, social enterprise and private businesses.

The Learning in Brief

Challenges and successes in response to the pandemic have been broadly similar across Scotland, despite the demographic and geographical differences between, for example, communities in the Highlands and those in the central belt. There were particular contrasts in *operational* hurdles caused by dispersed populations, poor internet connectivity and areas with pockets of especially vulnerable people.

It should also be noted that although the debates were divided into three separate themes for discussion purposes, challenges and success in each area were often interconnected and interdependent on challenges and success in others.

Overall, while there were some specific criticisms of initially slow responses from national and local funders, and some mutual wariness, the broad consensus across all regions was that most people, most organisations, most of the time, had gone the extra mile to adapt to new and effective ways of working to support their communities.

There was considerable discussion about what should come next. The following key points were recognised as being crucial to supporting communities towards a sustainable and resilient future:

1) **There is a need for accessible and comprehensive place-based registers of community groups, social enterprises, voluntary organisations.** Some areas do have efficient third sector interface organisations, but most don't. The benefit of being able to quickly find and connect with likeminded and useful groups extends far beyond the present crisis.

2) Trust has been the cornerstone of new collaborations and improved relationships between funders and recipients. With common goals – and with much bureaucracy and competition removed from the equation – organisations have together achieved results which depend on collaboration, rather than red tape and suspicion. **The rediscovered trust that has emerged through these different kinds of partnerships is a valuable foundation for building for the future.** Resources should be diverted to structures which can support and sustain these improved relationships and working practices.

3) The pandemic created heightened system wide dependency on those able to engage directly with communities. In doing so it flagged up the pre-existing crisis around the lack of core funding. Many larger partners were reliant on others to deliver available good and services on the frontline. Some local authorities, national organisations – even the *Connecting Scotland* programme – depended on

local groups providing pathways into communities. **Frontline, place-based groups require core funding to continue to deliver vital programmes and services.**

4) **Whether or not to go online should be a matter of choice. It should not be dependent upon income or available connectivity.** Until everyone has the opportunity to use new technology, the digital divide will continue to exacerbate already damaging inequalities**.**

In addition to the conclusions above about what will be needed going forward, there were a number of broader issues, views and suggestions raised during the five regional events.

DIGITAL CONNECTIONS

o The COVID response accelerated an inevitable transition to online communication.
o Not everything can be done online, but some processes can be done better that way
o Digital challenges – whether because of poor access to the internet or equipment, or lack of knowledge and experience – disproportionately impact on those groups already 'hard to reach'
o The pandemic provoked more creative and innovative thinking around service delivery, especially in the use of digital communication *and* in the development of processes for reaching those who weren't easily online
o There were some contradictions. For example; online communication democratised engagement and access for some, but excluded others
o Benefits included financial savings, reduced environmental/ecological footprint, flexibility of timings and capacity, access to those with home-based responsibilities and to a broader geographical base
o Scottish Government's *Connecting Scotland* programme is pursuing the right goals – education, provision of equipment and connectivity – but goals need to be met much faster to reduce the digital divide in communities and between communities across Scotland
o In many important respects, digital connections cannot replace face to face contact across the board, but most projects now accept the positive potential of further incorporating online communication going forward

FUNDING

o Most funding organisations, national and local, responded quickly and flexibly to changes, although there were criticisms of some funder responses, especially in the early days
o Funding organisations faced many of the same challenges as their clients - furloughed staff, home working without the use of technology, insecurity about their own funding and increasing pressure from those needing their professional support.

- Projects identified the reduction in red tape, simplified application processes, the speed of responses and the speed with which funds were released, as key to providing the urgent support needed
- Funders adapted their processes to meet demand as it arose, with internal departments collaborating to remove barriers
- The crisis highlighted and exaggerated some pre-existing issues. For example; how to support active local groups without formal structures
- Funders recognise that some changes need to become a permanent part of new processes in the future, but presently ongoing firefighting leaves little time to review and reflect
- Frontline and community anchor organisations which adapted to changes and made investments in the services they delivered during lockdown, say that sustained core funding is now needed as a priority

PARTNERSHIPS

- Organisations with a history of multi-agency collaboration were ahead of the game.
- Lockdown created opportunities for disparate groups to join forces, including those with previous history of unhealthy competition
- However, lockdown also exacerbated pre-existing in some relationships between community groups and their local authority
- New symbiotic links have been forged between business and private enterprise and third sector groups
- There is a drive to sustain and develop new relationships which have been created in response to the pandemic
- Local organisations with properly constituted structures and pre-existing relationships with funders were crucial, in that they were able to accept funds on behalf of other groups
- Lockdown showed up gaps in working practices and cohesion. For example, the difficulties in some areas of accessing comprehensive lists of local third sector organisations. This delayed – and in some cases blocked - distribution of available resources and funds
- COVID track records of cohesion and collaboration will be used to support future applications for joint funding.

GENERAL

- There is a heightened awareness of the value of all green space. Community gardens, allotments, and public parks all played – and continue to play - key roles in maintaining physical and mental wellbeing
- There are changes in understanding what classifies any particular group as vulnerable. For example; increasing concerns about families trying to home-school, or those living alone.

- There are concerns over many public processes, like land buy outs or reviews of public building closures, which have stalled with no indication as to when or if they will begin again.
- With the identification of long COVID, the lines between what constitutes an emergency and what defines recovery, are blurred.
- There is an increased recognition of the importance of maintaining accessible, comprehensive and up to date local registers of community groups, anchor organisations, activists, volunteers

Learning in Context

The above bullet point findings are distilled from hundreds of comments made by the 120-plus participants in the SCSC COVID themed events. The section below provides some details and broader context of the discussions that took place. There is some repetition across the themes. This reflects the reality of the interconnectedness which evolved as previous 'barriers' dissolved and many different communities and partners came together to collaborate on immediate needs.

DIGITAL CONNECTIONS: One early, obvious, and ongoing casualty of the pandemic is the face-to-face connections and activities around which most community programmes are designed.   The move online initially exposed and exacerbated the existing inequalities already suffered by those without access to digital communication. It also underlined the inconsistent availability of Scotland's internet infrastructure.

Many frontline delivery organisations described how they had gone 'old school' to reach those without digital access. Delivering leaflets was popular with excluded groups, not just because of the content of the messages delivered but because it provided a brief moment of human contact. Regular telephone calls became a rare and valuable moment of contact with the outside world for the most isolated. Delivery of food and other necessities also provided some kind of human connection for those alone.

The Scottish Government's *Connecting Scotland* programme's focus on developing skills and accessing equipment and the internet were seen as important, but some organisations felt the continuing dependence on third sector groups to deliver services failed to recognise or reimburse the cost of those groups doing so.

There were unanticipated benefits and opportunities for those organisations which were able to adapt to different digital processes. For many it democratised participation in decision making and strategy planning. Being able to join conversations from "your own front room" allowed those to take part who'd previously been constrained by their role as carer or parent. Some people, who felt uncomfortable or intimidated at public meetings, described how participating in a Zoom call felt 'safer'. Those who were furloughed or who moved from an office to their own home similarly found themselves with a flexibility not previously enjoyed. Existing 'barriers' between previously unconnected disparate groups in communities dissolved when online group meetings became the most effective method of knowledge gathering.

There was, however, a general view that while the pandemic has accelerated the inevitable move towards online communication, it should not be seen as a substitute for face to face contact. There will always be those who cannot or will not be comfortable with this technology and there are many activities which cannot be recreated online. The SCSC event participants are looking to a future that is comfortable with a hybrid of new and old technology alongside a return to face to face human contact.

FUNDING: Funding organisations were not just faced with the desperate needs of communities to supply them with resources and money. Like other organisations, they had to secure their own finances and find new ways of working, while dealing with the urgent requirements of those frontline organisations struggling to keep themselves and their communities afloat. The systems for processing applications had to be rethought as offices were closed and staff were deployed at home without adequate equipment or technology to support an unheralded number of cries for help.

Red tape could not be simply dispensed with. Finance, legal and funding departments had to agree on ways of reducing bureaucracy, while still protecting public funds. Decisions had to be made about whether to honour commitments to projects that could not operate during the pandemic, when money was needed urgently elsewhere. Most of the funding organisations are still firefighting, with little time yet for reflection on what has been achieved or how these experiences can inform future plans.

Because many recipient organisations were also locked away from office equipment, funding staff found themselves printing and posting application forms. In contrast other applications which might have previously required printed and signed documents were completed entirely online. Organisations are enthusiastic about the benefits that have been brought about by a forced streamlining of application forms. The trust necessary to reduce red tape has given anchor groups a sense of autonomy and agency. Funding recipients described themselves as feeling more like partners than supplicants.

Discussions around collaboration again referenced the need for comprehensive registers of place based third sector organisations.

PARTNERSHIPS: Collaboration and partnership working have become the standard during COVID as groups across Scotland have pulled together across sectors and locations to respond as quickly and effectively as possible to those in need. There were dozens of examples of organisations joining forces in ways which had not been experienced before. Overall, there was a strong desire that these new ways of working together should be nurtured and sustained beyond the present crisis.

Pre-existing groups with formal governance structures were able to act as holding 'bankers' for new informal groups without the capacity to monitor funds. In some areas church groups and residents' groups found themselves cooperating for the first time to establish registers of those in need and to meet those needs. Private enterprise including restaurants, supermarkets, pharmacies, farm shops, small businesses and furloughed

workers combined with third sector groups to find ways of helping each other. Empty shops promoted community events and displayed craft work while community groups set up stands to sell local products. They combined skills to source food and prepare and deliver it.   Long standing antagonisms between some community groups and some local authorities were overcome. Some community groups commented on the increased level of innovative responses from local council officers who were freed up from what was previously considered to be necessary levels of formality. There were of course areas where even the pandemic couldn't triumph over some long held resentments, but overall the majority of organisations found ways of collaborative working for the greater good.

Previously casual set ups have been formalised into partnerships. There is a real desire to sustain the new relationships between business and communities. Organisations that were in competition are in partnership. Diverse policies and aims have been streamlined in pursuit of common goals. Volunteers have enjoyed new challenges. Everyone was in agreement that successful collaboration delivers better services and has a better chance of attracting funding and other resources.

There was a consensus among participants that they wanted support to both embed and develop the new collaborations.

What next?

This report concludes SURF's series of three COVID response papers. These began with SURF's original research based on the experience of more than 150 frontline delivery organisations and the agencies which have supported them during the first nine months of the pandemic in Scotland.

SURF will continue to use its extensive network to gain unique access to the lived experience of both place-based and national organisations and to monitor and respond to events and processes as they develop. In November, 2020, when the SCSC events were held, there were already concerns being expressed about the impact of a winter lockdown. While that winter lockdown unfolds around us, SURF will gather learning through our network with the intention of hosting a further series of progressive and productive SCSC events in the Spring.

Thank you to everyone whose experience contributed to this report. Further Information on SURF and the SURF Cross- Sector Connector service can be found at https://www.surf.scot/

End of report, Elaine Cooper, Learning and Development, SURF, January 2021