



SURF
Scotland's Independent Regeneration Network

SURF : sharing experience : shaping practice

Summary Report: Scottish Election Question Time



A debate on the future of community regeneration in Scotland

Background

The purpose of this event was for the SURF network to explore SURF's [2011 Manifesto for Community Regeneration](#) with political party representatives in advance of the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections.

This 'Scottish Election Question Time' gathering provided the opportunity to discuss and debate the way forward for community regeneration in Scotland in a particularly challenging time.

The event took place in the Glasgow Housing Association (GHA) Academy on the afternoon of Wednesday 13th April. SURF is grateful to GHA for providing this facility.

Participants

The party representatives were:

- Robert Brown MSP, Scottish Liberal Democrats
- Patrick Harvie MSP, Co-Convenor, Scottish Green Party
- Johann Lamont MSP, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party in the Scottish Parliament
- Cllr David Meikle, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party
- Sandra White MSP, Scottish National Party

The debate was chaired by Andy Milne, Chief Executive of SURF.

Event Summary

Opening Statements

The party representatives were each given five minutes to provide a brief opening statement in response to the 2011 SURF Manifesto.

Robert Brown MSP (Lib Dems) called the manifesto “mind-stretching, ambitious and relevant” in recognising the difficult financial reality in which future community regeneration efforts will have to operate. The Scottish Liberal Democrats, he argued, would fight to maximise the value of every public pound spent in Scotland and look at ways of increasing capital investment.

Robert highlighted the following party policies in his opening statement: more financial powers for the Scottish Parliament; a £500m fund for regional development banks; changing the status of Scottish Water to free up £1.5bn for capital investment; oppose centralising policies in police/councils/enterprise; provide more work experience for young people; and support the community assets route to empowerment. He also said that key party priorities were to support greater investment around early intervention, green energy & science research, high speed broadband and more assistance for looked-after children.

Patrick Harvie MSP (Green) was “very impressed” by the manifesto, but felt that it would be seriously problematic to attempt to implement all manifesto commitments in the context of considerable public spending cuts. He argued that most people in Scotland would agree the UK Government cuts were too fast, too deep, and driven by an ideological agenda; and that the purpose of the Scottish Parliament was to find new solutions to protect the country.

Patrick emphasised a number of Scottish Green Party policies, including: placing a higher tax burden on the wealthy to enable greater investment in communities; implementing a land value tax to further raise public revenues; demanding that all local authorities develop a public register of their assets and a business plan to inform considerations around community asset transfer; and that a proportion of the profits generated by the renewable

energy industry in Scotland should go to public/voluntary/community sector players for reinvestment in the local communities.

Johann Lamont MSP (Labour) was interested in the manifesto title: 'Delivering community regeneration in hard times'. She felt that 'hard times' has become an excuse to deliver ideologically motivated spending cuts. She also argued that this is a timely opportunity to think about the purpose and direction of government, and that the future administration should work much more closely with local voluntary/community organisations.

Johann drew attention to a range of Scottish Labour Party priorities: challenging youth unemployment, and minimising the disproportionate impact on disadvantaged communities; a strong commitment to supporting local economic activity through cooperatives; review the Community Planning process and the 'tick-box' approach to community engagement; a greater role for housing associations in offering training/skills locally and building community capacity; and 'bending' public spending to more effectively meet the needs of disadvantaged communities.

Cllr David Meikle (Conservatives) congratulated SURF on a "very interesting" manifesto, and agreed that a more successful approach towards community-led regeneration is required. He contended that more public spending is not the answer and that the 'Big Society' model was the way forward in enabling communities to do more for themselves.

David cited the following Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party priorities for regeneration: utilising the voluntary sector more in providing employment programmes; developing incentives for small businesses to establish themselves in communities; supporting the devolution of funding to the community level; making it easier for private companies to bid for public sector contracts; and supporting innovation in public investment through the Scottish Futures Trust and Public Private Partnerships. He also argued that the £60m Town Centre Regeneration Fund (TCRF) had proved highly successful and that the party is committed to further TCRF investment.

Sandra White MSP (SNP) saw a 'down-up' approach from the community as being the key to the successful delivery of future regeneration plans. She claimed that no Westminster Government had ever proved successful in supporting Scottish communities, and that greater Scottish independence is the only way of changing this situation.

Sandra discussed a number of current and proposed Scottish National Party policies, including: continuing the Climate Challenge Fund that enables community groups to take local action on addressing climate change; guaranteeing 25,000 Scottish apprenticeships through the Scottish budget; providing a dedicated funding stream for local community groups; and offering assistance to struggling local businesses through the Small Business Bonus. Sandra also said she was "very proud" of the current Scottish Government's record in community engagement and argued that the party would continue to ensure that the community voice is heard.

Open Debate

SURF network participants were invited to contribute constructive questions for consideration by the panel of party representatives. Some of the main questions and the party responses are summarised below.

Pamela Brown, Raploch Urban Regeneration Company: The SURF manifesto highlights protecting against unemployment and investing in the future as two of the main priorities for community regeneration. The low-carbon industry has enormous potential in Scotland. How can we ensure that training at the lower end of the market in energy efficiency is adequately delivered through local colleges and businesses?

Patrick Harvie referred to a successful insulation scheme in Kirklees, Yorkshire, which delivered measures on a street-by-street basis. Local contractors were used and training needs were identified locally. He argued that this model should be used more widely as it is more efficient and cost-effective as compared with the use of a single national contractor. He also discussed the success of the Climate Challenge Fund in empowering communities to meet their own energy and training needs.

Johann Lamont mentioned a private members' bill to encourage the use of windmills in local communities. She said that building up a number of seemingly small measures like this could make a great difference overall. Johann also argued for a 'second chance education', through which young people from disadvantaged communities who have left school without qualifications or aspirations are given the chance to develop skills in new industries through community colleges.

Robert Brown said Scotland has fallen behind globally in micro-renewables, and that it could catch up through the provision of better training. He referred a desire for more funding for college bursaries. He also said that there was a recognition that colleges don't always provide industry-relevant training in specialised industries. Such industries often prefer in-house training and apprenticeships, and he said that the party is keen that more is done to support training and development opportunities across all sectors.

Sandra White stated that Scotland should be the green energy capital of the world, and agreed with Robert that extending bursaries was an effective way to consolidate this. She also mentioned the inclusion of clauses in construction contracts that assist local employment needs by restricting participation to local companies/residents. She said that this should be used more widely, and that EU legislation is not a barrier as is commonly thought.

David Meikle spoke of the Scottish Conservative Party's support for vocational education and apprenticeships, and the party's commitment to providing recruitment support for employers.

Steven Byrne, Highland & Argyll & Bute Regional Network of Registered Tenants Organisations: Community volunteers in our rural communities are at breaking point.

There is very little funding available to enable them to help their communities. What is the answer?

Sandra White said that there are funding realms for rural communities out there, such as the Climate Challenge Fund, funding streams that are only available to Community Councils, and through the Big Lottery Fund. She appreciated that red tape can be a big issue for volunteers in making applications.

Johann Lamont called for greater support for community involvement in rural Scotland, which she understood is often neglected. She also argued against the contradictory nature of local authorities in rural regions having to reduce their preventative spending budgets, when this simply results in the necessity of greater spending later on.

Robert Brown said that there should be a greater focus on community transport and early years' education in rural Scotland, as these can be difficult and sensitive issues that don't always get the policy attention they deserve. He also spoke of the need to reach a point of critical mass through the development of a range of measures to help communities.

Patrick Harvie agreed that no one silver bullet would offer a solution. He claimed that, in all Scottish Parliament elections to date, the major parties always talk about devolving more power to communities but that this rarely happens once the election is over. He said that a genuinely committed approach to community empowerment would lead to a virtuous circle towards rural community organisations becoming increasingly more effective at improving their communities.

John Macdonald, Community Transport Association: Modest changes to existing legislation would facilitate a much stronger potential role for community transport in addressing market failure in urban and rural areas.

Ross McEwan, Joined-Up Master-Planning: Are there any democratic alternatives to the use of TIF (Tax Incremental Finance) funding? In Edinburgh, £96m of TIF funding has been granted. This means that the local communities lose £96m of future revenue that goes on top-down spend.

Craig McLaren, Royal Town Planning Institute: Planning has a major role in sustainable regeneration, but planners will always have a difficult job in having to deal with so many competing interests. Are there any changes the panel would like to see in the planning system?

Patrick Harvie claimed that the planning system was not living up to the democratic ideals on which it was originally developed, and that it often serves the interests of developers, who can afford lawyers, over community concerns. He criticised the use of TIF funding in Glasgow to support an extension to Buchanan Galleries shopping centre, and argued that this was the wrong kind of project for TIF funding, because it underpinned a private venture. He said that a land value tax would offer a better, more democratic alternative.

Johann Lamont said that it was possible for the planning system to become something other than a battleground. The more effective use of planning, she argued, would bring more local jobs to communities across Scotland. She referred to planning legislation that she took through the Scottish Parliament in an earlier administration, and said that she would like the next Scottish Government to conduct a post-legislative review and an audit of any breaches to ensure it is being used effectively.

Sandra White agreed that planning is a central element in regeneration, but wanted to see more community engagement. She argued that more community consultation would help to defuse tensions. She said that some Scottish companies have a very good reputation when it comes to this, while others are very poor, but all of them can meet the minimum consultation requirements. She also contended that a greater variety of residents, such as pensioners and mothers with young children, should be more involved in the planning process, for instance to ensure public buildings meet their needs.

Robert Brown echoed Johann's argument about the 2006/07 legislation representing a significant advance in Scottish planning, but accepted that there was a long way to go as local communities might not have satisfactorily perceived an increase in fairness. He also agreed with a point Patrick made in his opening statement, that the concept of the 'common good' had been neglected in modern Scotland and that the economic situation presents a strong opportunity for its being revisited, particularly in considerations around the development of parks and civic areas.

David Meikle agreed that planning is key to regeneration, and claimed that successful regeneration processes in Glasgow have always been led by the private sector within a democratic council planning process. He said that, in general, planners should welcome private investment. Following a brief exchange with Patrick, David argued that councillors are not conflicted in the planning process and that planning committees are fair, democratic and open.

Ian Wall, Vice Chair of SURF: Planning is a means to an end. The Scotland Housing Expo in Inverness in 2010 was an excellent example of experts coming to share innovative ideas, encourage experimentation in housing design and build up a body of evidence. If you got back into Parliament, would you push hard to extend this model to other policy areas and industries?

All party representatives agreed they would support such a model.

Rebecca Brady, Individual: One expert recently said that the real cost of climate change would be measured in the hundreds of trillions of pounds. Are we aware of the real cost of climate change?

Emilie Devlin, Langside & Linn Community Reference Group: All parties are saying that communities should be empowered. But where is the funding to make this possible?

John McVicar, Lambhill Stables & Emmaus Glasgow: In the change from Social Inclusion Partnerships to Community Planning Partnerships, genuine community engagement was lost in Scotland as community forums were discarded.

Robert Brown said there was a need for communities to come together around organisations through which wider action can be delivered. He saw housing associations and community energy projects as the best example of this. Independent funding models, in which profits are reinvested in the community, would present the ideal. He also argued that national voluntary bodies could, in some cases, provide a better route for distributing funds to the community level than local authorities; and saw a role for ring-fencing as an effective tool in achieving central government objectives.

Johann Lamont felt there was too much lip service around community engagement. She asserted that a review of Community Planning structures could help result in more meaningful engagement. She agreed with Robert that ring-fencing can be useful, and that it can be productive in encouraging a greater level of partnership working. She also felt that community assets should not be about dilapidated and failing buildings, it should also be about energetic and dynamic ones.

Sandra White agreed with Johann that community assets should not be limited to the running of community halls. She said the Community Empowerment Bill was effective in raising ambitions and aspirations. She also wanted to see community facilities, such as school swimming pools, being made available for use by the wider community.

James Arnott, Individual: I want to ask a question about the banking system. Do we expect the banks to reform themselves? Or do credit unions, company loan funds and similar present an alternative to banks that should be developed?

Patrick Harvie said he couldn't agree more with the tone of the question, and that before the collapse of the banking system, all the major parties were captivated by the financial services industry. He argued that we don't need to have a banking structure dominated by 'mega-banks', and that some other EU countries also have big banks but have a more prominent role for local and regional credit unions, cooperatives and mutuals. He stated that a diverse banking system could protect us better in even tougher economic times to come, with a reference to peak oil.

David Meikle said that the questioner presented two options, but argued that it is possible to have both. He expressed a dislike for 'bashing the banks', as banks provide jobs and invest in our communities. He also saw nothing wrong with a system that has a range of large, successful banks, and claimed that the banking collapse was due to a failure of regulation by the previous UK Labour Government.

Johann Lamont argued that cooperatives had survived where some private banks failed because of the former's ethical basis. She said that we need to go back to this, and criticised the current UK Government's approach to banking reform.

Sandra White said that the question illustrated a major issue. She suggested that a proportion of private banking profits should be invested in local solutions.

Robert Brown was of the opinion that Scotland was lagging behind Ireland, as the latter had developed their credit unions to a greater degree of success. He thought it better to tackle the problem of 'inflated super-banks' now rather than dealing with bigger problems ahead.

Closing Statements

The party representatives were asked to provide a very brief closing statement. Before they did so, the chair invited guests to offer short pieces of advice to the panel should they be successfully re-elected/elected to parliament. These contributions were:

- Work together
- Listen to the people
- Be ambitious
- Do what you say you'll do
- Give me my land back
- Don't close the libraries
- Create better community solutions
- Private development is not always good for regeneration

Sandra White felt that improving aspirations for our young people, tackling deprivation, increasing jobs and developing community transport were the main priorities. The ultimate purpose of the next Scottish Government, she argued, was to give the people of Scotland something to look forward to.

David Meikle was struck by the level of cross-party consensus around the most pressing issues, and saw this as a very positive outcome.

Johann Lamont agreed that the consensus was positive, but also saw value in the disagreements and contested debate. She said that government cannot make all the necessary changes alone, but can play a more active role in drawing expertise from the community.

Patrick Harvie was pleased to hear questions about the future of the financial sector, and repeated that there is an alternative to the spending cuts agenda. He said that recovery meant something different to reinvention, and that the economy should be based on land, water, energy, and food, not based on speculation, credit swaps and 'buccaneer capitalism' where people are seen as commodities instead of resources.

Robert Brown said that we have no choice but to be realistic and face up to difficult economic realities. He felt the emphasis should be on improving life chances for our young people. He commented that ordinary people in ordinary communities have the right to take regeneration issues forward, and should not simply have things done to them from above.

Derek Rankine, SURF Events and Communications Officer, 14th April 2011
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