SURF: sharing experience: shaping practice

SURF'S RESPONSE TO THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S COVID-19 ECONOMIC RECOVERY ADVISORY GROUP

Background

In May 2020, Benny Higgins, Chair of the Scottish Government's <u>Advisory Group on Economic</u> <u>Recovery</u>, wrote to SURF requesting its views on the economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In contacting SURF and other relevant organisations, the Advisory Group is particularly interested in gathering the information, views and proposals that would enable it to form recommendations for achieving the strongest post-pandemic recovery. In responding as Scotland's long-standing regeneration forum, SURF has been able to draw on the knowledge and experience of its cross-sector network of practitioners, policy makers and academics.

SURF's response to selected questions set the by the Advisory Group are set out below. The Advisory Group will use the information it receives to prepare a report with recommendations for Scottish Government Ministers in June 2020.

Acknowledgements

The following SURF members, Directors and staff contributed to the preparation of this submission freely and at short notice. SURF is grateful to all of them for their time and effort. Please note that named individuals may not necessarily agree with all of the different views and ideas presented in SURF's composite response

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Section One: Macro/Fiscal

What will be the shape and form of the recovery and what will be the implications for the future growth and structure of the economy?

The quick and short answer to this question is: "If anyone actually knows the shape and form of the recovery and its implications, they will make a fortune."

The shape, form and timescale are not at all clear. In the absence of a COVID-19 vaccine in the short term, the main issue will be the trade-off between health risks and economic risks. Economic risks will be partly determined by how long it takes for consumer confidence (and spending) to return. That, in turn, will depend on what businesses survive and which go under post-furlough, and the level of unemployment this generates. Leading economic commentators predict it will be considerable.

The policy and investment focus therefore needs to be on what will be sustainable post-COVID, and what requires support to do both of the following: get through the current crisis; and adapt to the new conditions. Evolution teaches us that it is not the fittest who survive, but the most adaptable.

One clear expectation, is that those most affected by business collapse and unemployment will be those who are younger, with less experience and fewer qualifications/skills. So, what can be done to keep them in contact with the world of work? A second expectation is that less well connected and resourced geographical areas, will be disproportionately affected and will lack what economists would call 'effective demand' to reboot and revive.

In some instances, these two problems will co-exist in the same multiply deprived places that are SURF's chief focus of concern. The well-documented experience of the 1980s, taught us that if we don't adequately deal with this, the scarring and longer term costs will be an economic drag for the future development of all of Scotland.

What can we learn from other countries and how can we draw on this experience given the constraints of Scottish Government powers?

The best learning may be achieved through reframing the question as: "How can Scotland work with other countries in the rebuilding process, and how can it learn most usefully from the experience?"

There are a number of ways this approach can be delivered. Scotland should look to play a full role in multi-national collaboration and joint initiatives, including actively supporting Scottish partners' involvement in programmes and projects focusing on progressive and green COVID-19 responses, such as Horizon 2020 European Union funded research and the work of institutions like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Beacons of best practice are emerging internationally, such as Vancouver or Milan. Developing an active relationship with the relevant national or municipal administrations in these places would yield the best results. Finally, there is a cluster of comparator countries where ongoing collaboration would be particularly productive, including Norway, New Zealand, Canada, Denmark and Ireland.

How will Brexit impact on the recovering UK and Scottish economies?

The accumulating effects of Brexit may well turn recession into stagnation and depression. The present Brexit transition period is likely to end just as the economy starts to recover. Few industries have escaped COVID-19, and those hit hardest (e.g. tourism, exports) will be further exposed to Brexit impacts.

Scotland has more experience than most of the devastation that rapid losses of key industries means for communities and for the wider economy. The life chances of future generations are radically changed for the worse.

In the words of one of SURF's members, existing highly problematic inequalities are already becoming 'supercharged'. That is a situation which is likely to be exacerbated further by Brexit. Scotland has a vibrant voluntary sector, which is proving to be critical in supporting people through the immediate crisis. Despite welcome short term support, its financial resilience is being undermined through loss of trading and fundraising income.

To alleviate COVID-19 and Brexit damage, Scotland should take a lead in new approaches to achieving fair and sustainable economic growth. These should be collectively focused on tackling the inequalities that undermine the prospects of the poorest people and places, and in a more dedicated and consistent fashion than has been achieved in recent decades.

In addition to exposing underlying weaknesses, the crisis has also highlighted highly successful community collaborations and the vital role that front line organisations, workers and volunteers play both in sustaining essential services and evolving new enterprises; as SURF has been regularly showing in its COVID-19 Response special bulletins. Consistent with that enhanced shared awareness, we need to review how we value and invest in key local workers and organisations, as well as financial and other forms of support for those out of work due to unemployment, poor health or being unpaid carers.

Section Two: Micro/Enterprise

What are the most important steps the Scottish Government could take to support businesses to drive a strong economic recovery? How could it best incentivise holders of private capital to invest in the recovery?

A successful recovery following COVID-19 would have to involve encouraging a new pattern of business and public sector investment to address the high risks of further exclusion of Scotland's deprived and disconnected places from the wider economy.

That will require the targeting of support to enterprises located within deprived areas, to help them flourish. That should run alongside the encouragement of other businesses seeking to expand in the future to locate in these areas. This ambition should include proactive connectivity with any international business investment secured through new trade agreements following Brexit.

Under this reformed pattern of place-focused business investment, local workers currently excluded from employment through skills and health deprivation, can be recruited, enabled by employer support schemes, such as those successfully operated within the Clyde Gateway area of east Glasgow and South Lanarkshire. Achieving this pattern of business investment and recruitment will help deliver aspirations for a more inclusive, more successful wider economy.

It will, however, require the development of capacity within the most deprived communities in the form of: engaging local knowledge and community involvement; flexible employment funding to meet the specific skills and health needs of local people, which currently are not being addressed; and engagement of local and regional businesses with continuing unfilled vacancies, with a reformed recruitment process which has been de-risked for the business, and which provides ongoing support for sustainment in employment and advancement within the business.

This should be allied to a joint programme of support for residents of deprived areas who have been forced into precarious employment, and who will benefit from increased participation in fair and sustainable work. This will help ensure that prosperity is shared more equally across Scottish society,

tackling poverty, inequality, and exclusion. Now more than ever, Scotland cannot afford to neglect or underuse the talents of so many people.

The alignment across enterprise and skills, supported by the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board, is particularly important within the context of COVID-19. Improving integration and alignment of employability provision within local communities must be a key consideration of any business incentives offered to holders of private capital and must be practically achievable at a local level. The programme is equally relevant to major public sector employers who can support inclusive growth and, at the same time, achieve major savings by locating within deprived areas. As new organisations are developed, such as Social Security Scotland, with no encumbrances around location, the opportunity to roll-out this model across Scotland's deprived areas is extensive.

How do we ensure that differences in impact and outcomes across rural and urban areas are addressed?

Impacts and outcomes will be experienced differently by people and communities in rural and urban areas. The negative impacts of the crisis for agriculture, construction and tourism (such as the reduction in availability of overseas workers) are being felt especially strongly in rural areas, where these sectors are relatively more important.

The impacts of isolation and shielding may be more acute in rural areas, where residents may already experience isolation, loneliness and mental health challenges, and where digital connectivity is poor or absent. The risks of (already strained) rural health and social care services becoming overstretched are also more severe. The Scottish Government's aim to encourage more walking/cycling will be more difficult in rural areas, where safe walking and cycling routes are often absent and distances to travel are much longer.

To address these differential impacts, relevant projects and research must include different geographies so they can be compared and understood. Short-term evidence-gathering and long-term monitoring are required. Informed by this research, policy responses and initiatives (such as business support schemes) need to be place-based and appropriate for different geographies, and subject to ongoing evaluation and review.

Design and delivery may require robust rural-proofing, through which the likely differential policy impacts in rural areas are understood and policies adjusted accordingly, where they are judged to have negative consequences.

Section Three: Labour Market and Inequalities

What will the implications of the recovery be for different groups, unemployment and on the nature of work? How is the recovery likely to impact on socio-economic inequality as a whole?

SURF shares the concern of University of Edinburgh Professor of Global Public Health Devi Sridhar, who argues that wealth is the best shield against the coronavirus for individuals. Deprived, higher density neighbourhoods and towns in the west of Scotland are therefore at particularly high risk, as are thematic groups such as ethnic minorities and key workers on low incomes.

The significant level of investment that is currently going into front-line, short-term pandemic response services is welcome, but it is unclear if these investments will be sustained for the prolonged period in which exposure to COVID-19 infection remains a moderate risk.

How the recovery impacts on different groups, and on socio-economic inequality more broadly, will be a matter of political choice. We need to capitalise on the exposure that COVID-19 has given to the many forms of inequality that exist in Scotland, amplified by austerity, which are unacceptable and have led to a

less resilient society. A new approach built on a broad, keenly-felt consensus that long-standing structural inequalities must be prioritised, is now possible.

Beyond contracting the virus, there is a growing consensus that the pandemic impacts and associated mitigation measures are likely to create a 'super-recession'. Already disadvantaged places face exacerbated challenges. Many organisations in the SURF network are reporting funding crises; regeneration projects face delay, cancellation or downsizing; some shuttered businesses in town centres and elsewhere are unlikely to reopen; and unemployment and social security needs are rising sharply, even while the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and other temporary support mechanisms are in place.

The longer term impacts of these combined challenges could be disastrous for already deprived places in urban and rural Scotland; and thereby for the rest of Scotland in terms of collective social and economic cohesion and wellbeing.

There is a real danger of mass unemployment and a de-skilling of the workforce, particularly among younger and older people and those without advanced education. As we re-make the economy, taking account of the challenges of COVID-19, the climate emergency, rising technological trends and the growth in home-working, there are myriad opportunities for re-skilling new people- and planet-enhancing programmes of work. There may also be opportunities to share work better – e.g. move to four day weeks for full time work – and to better recognise the financial value and skills of people in front-line work.

How should inequalities by geography, generation, gender, age and ethnicity be addressed?

There is readily evident injustice in the way that some groups of society have been exposed to the virus, including ethnic minorities, who are disproportionately represented in higher risk occupations such as nursing, cleaning and taxi driving. With regards to Muslim communities in particular, there is a further challenge created by far right political groups, who are using the COVID-19 situation to spread narratives that promote division and hatred.

On ethnic inequalities, the Scottish Government and other public bodies should support general confidence building and undertake Equality Act impact assessments of COVID-19 related policy and resource decisions. Race-based structural inequalities within the pandemic, which have been highlighted by the Ethnic Minority Centre, should be addressed. The Scottish Government and NHS Scotland should: review and challenge the root causes of higher infection rates in ethnic minorities; undertake ethnic monitoring of all people infected by COVID-19; and take action to respond to concerns of a potential rise in hate crime and discrimination.

The people most at risk of infection tend to live in more deprived, higher density neighbourhoods. SURF's diverse network keeps it keenly aware of the scale of economic problems in already deprived and disconnected places. The degenerative pressures of the post-pandemic recession will be perhaps the most pressing problem in the years to come.

It is also well-documented that the elderly have the greatest risk of COVID-19 fatalities. They are also more likely to suffer from social isolation and digital exclusion, which means they may not be able to access support or communicate their needs effectively during the pandemic. An inclusive recovery should therefore prioritise the targeting of support at poorer places and those with high concentrations of older people. In the immediate term, the Scottish Government and its agencies should ensure that life-saving messages and key policy documents around COVID-19 are reaching isolated older people.

While men have higher COVID-19 death rates than women, there is evidence that the economic impacts of the pandemic are more likely to affect women, as evidenced in higher unemployment rate growth among women in some countries. Women are also more likely to be economically inactive, to have to provide more childcare during the pandemic, and to have additional caring responsibilities for extended family. The associated increased levels of stress could have a lasting effect on the wellbeing of the individuals. Targeted support for women who want to re-enter the labour market would help respond to

the gender-based economic challenge. The current situation has also seen an increase in reports of domestic abuse and violence against women.

What is the role for place-based assets, anchor institutions and community wealth-building, and how can their development be encouraged?

SURF has been showcasing local community responses to the pandemic in a series of special weekly bulletins to our network. We have collected more than 60 profiles from all parts of Scotland, all of which show nimble and effective service delivery and flexibility amid the pandemic crisis.

These profiles have demonstrated the fundamental importance of many place-based assets and anchor institutions during this public health crisis. They have often been the first to adapt and respond in communities. Their proactive collaborative working with local government and other partners has been particularly impressive in a number of areas.

In some places, community anchor organisations have had less supplementary support, but they continue to be critical in reducing inequalities and in representing people whose voices are not heard. Adequate and sustained investment (revenue and capital) in those organisations, in a form that responds to what they need most to thrive in their particular challenges and aspirations, should be central to economic recovery efforts.

Listening to people and community organisations explain about the places and spaces that they have missed the most, will also be critical. As will reflecting on those that may no longer be as important as once thought. Community wealth building should be prioritised, and should be accompanied by a meaningful review of procurement processes that have often hampered this in the past.

Local authorities such as North Ayrshire and East Ayrshire were considered to be ahead of the curve in much of their thinking about sustainable community development prior to COVID-19. Such authorities have been able to mobilise people and institutions quicker than most, and to have a head start on locally appropriate plans for economic recovery. This confirms the value of place-based, cross-sector collaboration, as SURF, the Scottish Government and partners are seeking to encourage via active promotion of the Place Principle.

Section Four: Wellbeing, Inclusive Growth and Net Zero

How can the wellbeing of the people of Scotland flourish and how can a wellbeing economy approach be embedded to bring distinct benefits to Scotland?

The intellectual seeds to build back better via a wellbeing economy, have already been planted and COVID-19 has made the case for change even more urgent. The Scottish Government has a unique opportunity to reshape Scotland's future. Seizing it will require bold use of all the levers it has.

These include:

- Attaching ambitious and strategic conditionality to all business support.
- Ramping up community-led solutions by building upon successful cases including Climate Challenge Fund investees and examples of community wealth building.
- Focusing on job quality, security and pay.
- Prioritising pre-distribution as well as redistribution.
- Prioritising the transition to a zero-carbon circular economy while embracing the Just Transition agenda.
- Utilising the wisdom of Scotland's Citizens Assembly.

 Going further and faster on many of the high potential initiatives already in place, such as the Sustainable Procurement duty, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act and the Circular Economy (Scotland) Bill.

There have been encouraging tentative moves in the right direction. Now is the time to bring them to life.

What are the opportunities for a Green recovery? Will there be an acceleration of trends to net zero or some retrenchment? What role might natural capital and the natural economy play?

The Scottish Government's economic recovery plan offers significant opportunity to deliver the strategic policy objective of net zero inclusive places. A Green recovery could pump greater levels of funding into existing low carbon programmes as an effective way to optimise medium term spending.

This could be via active transport with investment in walking and cycling, and in electric vehicle infrastructure via greater spend on the charging network. It could also support the decarbonisation of heat and improved energy efficiency for residential buildings, for example through enhanced investment in district heating networks.

There is also an increasingly strong case for additional investment to tackle the environmental and economically corrosive problem of vacant and derelict land, which particularly impacts on the health and prospects of deprived urban communities. Spending on forestry and peatland restoration to sequestrate carbon also benefits rural communities through improving their local environment.

How do we balance short-term needs against long-term impacts and social and environmental as well as economic outcomes?

In the current climate, the Scottish Government has faced two distinct issues. These can best be described, to use a medical analogy, as Acute and Chronic. Acute in the sense that the immediate issues caused to the economy by lockdown need to be addressed; Chronic in the sense that out with this there are many communities in Scotland that have faced disadvantages, added to the current issues, for decades and which have not been seriously addressed.

The Scottish Government needs to ensure that in this crisis, in contrast to the 2008 one, the response has to be even-handed. We cannot have a situation again where selected sectors are bailed out, whilst others, which had no role in creating the crisis, are not just neglected but are further excluded and damaged via reactive austerity measures.

Based on its well-articulated concerns and policy priorities, it should be possible for the Scottish Government and its key partner agencies, to construct a coordinated response, which builds successfully on the almost universally positive approach and admirable resilience of communities in Scotland to this crisis.

Section Five: Government, Policy and Delivery

What benefits can we capture from potential changes in the role of participatory democracy and alternative governance e.g. citizens assemblies?

The crisis has opened a new space for considering what is politically feasible and palatable. The conversation needs to move on from the recovery of an old economic model that clearly didn't work for many.

A wide range of voices must be heard following this complex and acute crisis, particularly as the impact

of the pandemic has not been felt uniformly across Scotland, with the least resourced being hardest hit. Participatory democracy and citizens' assemblies are ideally placed to lead the cross-sectoral and society-wide discussions essential to assess who, or what, takes priority in the post-COVID-19 context.

Generating a sense of fairness and trust is key as we navigate our way through the coming months. The process of prioritisation needs to be comprehensively and collectively agreed, as everyone is going to feel the effects during this period of economic recovery. As the outcomes may be harsh, it is imperative that the process leading to them is seen as fair and trustworthy. This cannot be delivered via a top-down process alone.

Is there value in a discussion of a need of a new social contract?

Exploring a new social contract is an ambitious undertaking requiring a significant investment of time, resources and energy across society, things that are in short supply during the crisis, and which will remain so in the foreseeable future. There are, however, strong arguments in favour of the timing never being better to start a debate on this, with enhanced prospects for fresh thinking and bold ideas.

SURF would welcome the opportunity to contribute to such an ambitious but timely undertaking, particularly through its ongoing development of a 2021 Manifesto for Community Regeneration process. The Citizens' Assembly for Scotland, convened by SURF Chair Kate Wimpress, provides a natural and particularly valuable forum for exploring ideas with a representative sample of the general population.

What is government not doing now that it should and vice versa?

Trust and confidence in each other and in our governments needs to be renewed and developed. Central to that is equity and transparency. Some specific suggestions are:

- Responsibility and fiscal powers need to be better aligned at local authority and Scottish Government levels.
- All public services should be provided by public service employees, not contractors.
- Taxes should be equitable across the whole range, instead of favouring the rich and those with capital.
- A more comprehensive system of National Insurance: we all pay in as insurance against
 accidents, ill health, unemployment, the payments made out to be substantial and related to
 individual needs and circumstances.
- Transparency on all contracts between commercial firms and governments, which should be published; all such contracts should have a mandatory Scottish Living Wage condition
- A regulatory level playing field for reducing carbon production to ensure that all business compete on other matters and not undercut competitors by ignoring the Climate Emergency.
- Introducing a 'Tobin Tax' on financial trading.

Section Six: Lessons / Data Insights

How do we ensure that we learn from the impact of the crisis and respond accordingly?

The advisory group should address Scotland's deep-rooted, spatial inequalities which harm the prospects of future generations and exacerbate social divisions. The economic potential of large parts of Scotland is not currently being realised. Wide regional imbalances persist, despite policy initiatives designed to reduce them.

Areas for change include:

- Resolving conflicting national policies, which are too departmental focused, and which follow trends rather than shape outcomes.
- Strained central-local relations: policy and resources are decided centrally but delivered locally.
- Strategies for growth are often based on flawed assumptions of spill over effects of growth from Scotland's cities. Investments tend to focus on linking regional areas to cities, which may be detrimental, rather than beneficial to each other.
- There is public investment bias towards cities and related market centres across all areas, such as in transport and housing.
- Narrow measures of success are focused on macro-economics, instead of wellbeing, social progress and quality of life.

COVID-19 has exposed regional disparities in health inequalities and economic disadvantage, and risks widening them if the policy response is not sensitive to place. Office for National Statistics data shows that the mortality rate from COVID-19 in more deprived areas is more than double that of less deprived areas.

Recent research by the Centre for Towns found significant variation in the economic impact of COVID-19 in different types of place due to the sectoral mix of their local economies. The ability of places to bounce back, will depend on underlying factors such as skill levels, local infrastructure and ability to attract investment.

An action plan needs to include:

- 1. A specific focus on disadvantaged communities, which have been proven to be more at risk during a pandemic, and tend to be more at risk of the effects of climate change and environmental degradation, such as fuel poverty, poorer air quality, lack of green space, biodiversity loss, and food risk.
- 2. A Scotland-wide approach to transport investment, to transform the public transport network featuring prioritisation of marginalised communities with the highest level of deprivation and lowest employment rates for transport investment, thus reconnecting them with services and economic opportunities within an integrated approach to investment in infrastructure and job creation.
- 3. Strengthening the foundations of local economies. Struggling communities are more dependent on essential goods and services, on which people rely and the quality of local jobs 70% of low-income workers work within two miles of where they live. These communities tend to have lower skills, poor transport and inferior digital infrastructure. They have not benefitted from the growth experienced in other places.
- 4. Empowering local leadership in towns and local communities to deliver increased local economic growth and wellbeing. The Welsh Government's approach of localised economic support in food, tourism, social care and retail provides a good template.
- 5. Rethinking the housing crisis. There is strategic policy failure because housing is treated separately to national infrastructure and housing investment does not attempt to shape the future economy. Instead, it follows and reinforces existing trends. Most housing expenditure is focussed on alleviating housing pressures in high demand areas of the central belt. Economic rebalancing would reduce this pressure, and should be aligned with a fundamental rethink of where supply of new housing meets the needs of the new economy and reduces rural depopulation.

What dialogues are arising that didn't previously exist?

Internationally, nationally and locally, the scale and nature of the crisis is exposing deep underlying fragilities in the economic and social systems that have been allowed to develop in recent decades. It is also providing a much needed boost for essential fresh thinking on alternative approaches and enhanced cooperation towards addressing the interconnected challenges of poverty, inequalities, sustainability and collective wellbeing.

National agencies, local government, businesses and community and voluntary organisations have to collaborate more actively and effectively. That is not easy at the best of times. SURF is having discussions with Scottish Government colleagues on how it can do even more to help to connect varied perspectives, roles, resources, information sources and capacities. The primary shared aim is to support resilience in Scotland's most disadvantaged and disconnected places.

We hope that, with the support of our members and networks, SURF can play an important role in promoting fundamental shared interests and practical transferable learning, in a way that will help the more resilient, inclusive and successful Scotland, that we all desire, to emerge from what will inevitably be a highly challenging experience for us all.

How do we capture and react to changing values and different perspectives on the role of public services and link different parts of government?

The pandemic has highlighted the absolute need for public services to be more 'joined-up' than ever before. Local government has the ability, but sometimes not the required resources, to react quickly and efficiently to vastly changing circumstances. The restructure of services and focus of resources where they are needed most in extreme circumstances, has been demonstrated across the public sector during the pandemic.

There is, however, perhaps some clarification required on how this support is expected to continue and if it is still needed after coming out of the current situation, when services return to a 'new normal'. Will local Councils be required and resourced to keep up some level of support to the business community, residents and third sector beyond the immediate crisis period?

Throughout regeneration-related fields, evaluation is a key element of project development and delivery. Each organisation and funder – whether public, private or third sector – has its own specific methodologies and requirements for evaluation. In order to capture and react to changing values and different sector-based perspectives, standardising evaluation requirements would be key to capturing comparable data, which can be utilised across different sectors and services within sectors. The current situation presents an opportunity to address this to enable that consistency to be achieved.

Perception of the public sector may have changed as a result of how individual organisations, businesses and individuals have been supported throughout this pandemic and what their individual experience has been in terms of interaction with public services. This relates to the availability of clear, easy-to-understand advice and guidance, the availability of support funding, and the ability to make contact with the 'right' person or service. All of these aspects and more influences the perception of the public sector.

Each local authority has developed its own method and process to support the most vulnerable in their communities in distributing essential food and medical supplies. This raises questions about standardisation. Could these processes have been standardised to avoid confusion and to enable a national message to be broadcast on how to access such support? From a construction perspective, Councils are looking at current contracts to clarify whether a specific COVID-19 clause should be introduced. Could there be national guidance issued for all contracts (goods and services) to ensure a consistent approach across the country? Likewise, should funders include a standard contract into third party grant contracts?

How will the current consensus on protecting health and vulnerable people drive future policy?

Saving lives and protecting people's health has been the number one priority in Scotland's response to the pandemic. For the first time in our lives, the economy has come second to the protection of people's health, with the general public complying on a massive scale with public health measures to protect those most at risk.

The 'can do' attitude exemplified by communities, public agencies and businesses can, and must, be taken beyond this crisis. It requires action at macro and micro levels to create an economic system that places health, social and environmental justice at its core.

As evidenced by the persistent health and social inequalities in Scotland, the current economic system is not fit for this purpose. We must collectively repurpose our economy to work for all, and the voices of the most marginalised are critical to the debate. Now is the time to make every policy action count, and to ensure that the route for Scotland's recovery is shaped by its citizens.

End of response

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