



SURF
Scotland's Independent Regeneration Network

SURF : sharing experience : shaping practice

Initial evidence submission from SURF to CoSLA's Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy

Submitted on 20 December 2013

1 Introduction

About SURF

As Scotland's independent regeneration network, SURF draws on its extensive cross-sector membership of over 250 organisations, to explore current practice, experience and knowledge in community regeneration.

Since 1992, SURF has been providing a neutral and constructive space to promote and facilitate the sharing of information, ideas and outcomes. It does so through a diverse programme of activities that includes seminars, conferences, policy exchanges, lectures, study visits, awards for best practice, and the distribution of information and comment in a variety of accessible formats. The resulting feedback is used to positively inform the development of more successful regeneration policy through SURF's links with key policy-makers in national and local government and policy influencers elsewhere. SURF's ultimate aim is to help enhance the wellbeing of individuals and communities across Scotland through improved regeneration policy and practice.

This consultation

SURF welcomes this opportunity to respond to the invitation to provide input to CoSLA's Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy. The linked issues of local democracy, decision making, participation and accountability are amongst the priority concerns of SURF's diverse, cross sector membership.

In relation to "How things should change", SURF has developed three practical and investigative 'Alliance for Action' initiatives in contrasting disadvantages communities within different Local Authority areas across Scotland. This collaborative process is demonstrating and recording how, with the active participation of local communities, as well as local authorities and other service providers and, productive change can be delivered for those communities.

If CoSLA colleagues wish to find out more about the 'Alliance for Action' activity, SURF would be pleased to discuss a suitable opportunity to present the thinking behind this process and the emergent connections and lessons so far. Meantime, a description of the process is available at this link to the SURF website: www.scotregen.co.uk/projects/alliance-for-action

2 Introduction

SURF's general position on 'localism' in regeneration.

Poverty and inequality are the main drivers of degeneration. Regeneration is therefore about improving the economic, social and cultural wellbeing of individuals and communities by addressing the full range of factors that tend to increase levels and concentrations of poverty and inequality.

Successful and sustainable regeneration depends on the appropriate participation of all sectors and players. This includes the meaningful involvement of the communities of theme and place which are the intended focus of any regeneration strategy. In order to access and engage the fullest available range of resources, knowledge and participation in what is often a challenging regeneration process, SURF supports the concept of practical subsidiarity. In principle, all relevant planning, decisions and actions should be carried out at the level closest to the intended point of delivery. The practicality of such an approach depends, however, on an accurate definition of the task, followed by the identification of the appropriate level of responsibility, and then the allocation of adequate resources, applied in a sufficiently sustained and coordinated manner.

In general, we have not been as successful as we could have been in following that balanced approach over recent decades. Instead we have oscillated between determinist but detached centralism and dogmatic but idealised visions of localism. We need to be more thoughtful and articulate about which level of decision making and activity is the most appropriate for which task and responsibility – and then find the political leadership to allocate powers and resources accordingly.

3 Responses to questions of evidence

1. **LOCAL DECISION MAKING: *Do you think that decisions about local issues and services are made locally enough in Scotland at the moment? If not, what does deciding 'locally' mean to you? Please illustrate your answer with any examples from your own experience.***

The answer to this question is, of course, 'it depends.' There is no 'one size fits all' definition of 'local'; it depends on the nature of the services being provided and the perception of those receiving those services.

Equally, there is no coherent definition of the services over which "local" decision making can be made. It is this ambiguity that allows the increasingly widely held view that many if not all decisions can be run through the prism of "local" when, in practical reality, that is not the case.

In order to bring the debate and practise into a more practical context, a distinction needs to be drawn between services which are strategically significant and therefore over which decisions need to be taken at the authority or national level; and those which are locally important and which can be subject to more localised decision making or influence.

Additionally, in its response to the consultations towards the Scottish Government's National Regeneration Strategy of December 2011, SURF advised that the Scottish Government should be definitive about which regeneration-related services it considered appropriate for recasting as social or private enterprises and those which, as essential elements of wider public good, should remain within the direct service delivery remit of

democratically accountable government locally and nationally. This key point has yet to be clarified.

As the COSLA paper “**Strengthening Local Democracy: A Vision for Local Government**” indicates, the current position whereby a binding understanding of the relationship between local and national government –one that devolves power and resources to local government, and that frees up councils from statutory duties and central direction- is absent. This appears to reduce many of the functions of Local Government to Local Administration and reduces the ability of communities to discern where decision making and influence at the local level begin and end.

The same dynamic can be said to exist within authorities. There can be a disconnect between the decisions which the authority makes at the strategic level and the interests, applicability and priorities at the local level.

SURF’s view is that, in the absence of a clear definition of the hierarchy of decision making, it is difficult to answer the question as to if decisions are/should be made locally. It depends on the service/process at issue but fundamentally it depends on whether there is an authentic ability to influence the outcome. If not, any attempt to present a process as ‘local decision making’ runs the risk of being perceived as tokenistic. That frequently held perception is well understood to diminish vital levels of trust and the prospects for more substantial and practical cooperation.

2. LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY: *How important do you think it is for locally elected people to be responsible for decisions about local issues and services? Do you have any examples of why this is the case?*

As stated above, locally elected people do not always make decisions which are perceived by the local communities to be in their best interests. There may be good reasons for this but if so, they are not always articulated to the community in a way which they can readily understand or accept.

As indicated in the previous response, there needs to be a clearer definition of what services are being delivered and those which are genuinely subject to meaningful influence at the local level. Only then will it be possible to judge the responsibility of locally elected people for the outcomes. There are, of course, other organisations, other than local authorities, which deliver services within our communities. These are subject to other governance arrangements. If the intention was to absorb such organisations and their responsibilities within the Local Government sphere, then it would be necessary to demonstrate that the resultant decisions would be genuinely subject to local influence and would be demonstrably better than under the pre-existing arrangements.

3. LOCAL PRIORITIES: *How well do you think that communities’ local priorities are accounted for in the way that national and local government works at the moment? What is effective, and if there is room for improvement, how should things change?*

This question is posed in an interesting way. It might be more appropriate for local government to suggest ways in which it accounts for communities’ local priorities at present and to suggest that national government do the same. In that way, the public and local communities could evaluate and decide whether or not they agree. It would equally

important for local government to describe the process whereby it balances the interests of a local community and the interests of the authority area.

Based on relevant interactions in the course of its work over recent decades, SURF is aware of great variety in attitudes, structures and practice, not only across different Local Authorities and Scottish Government, but between different levels of different departments and agencies. An enormous amount of time, effort and paper has been dedicated to the development of strategies aimed at achieving more consistent and effective 'community engagement'. The development of greater clarity, as referred to above, aligned to the encouragement of leadership at all levels and the appropriate allocation of responsibility and resources is more likely to produce the desired outcomes than the painstaking configuration of centrally determined processes. The creativity and bureaucratic flexibility required for more appropriate and responsive services will tend to result in what is often described as 'post code lotteries'. The term is often used pejoratively but such differentiated outcomes can be justified if they are shown to be the appropriate result of adequately informed and determined local decision making.

The substantial challenge to the success of a more successful localised approach comes not only from within the self protective tendencies of existing power centres within national and local government but from the existing imbalances in power, resources and networks within and between local communities. Pursuing a broad based policy of increasing local ownership of assets and processes without sufficiently addressing existing levels of inequality is likely to result in greater levels of inequality and exclusion which drives division and degeneration in the first place. The 'Sharp Elbows' research work of Prof. Annette Hastings at Glasgow University, on the success of well connected sections of society in securing more than their share of public resources, confirms the nature and dynamics of this phenomenon:
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/57021/1/57021.pdf>

4. STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY: *What do you think should be done to strengthen local democratic decision making in Scotland? Do you have any ideas or examples about how this could improve people's lives?*

The lack of participation in the local democratic process is, or should be, a concern across Scotland. Questions exist in respect of the role and representative nature of Community Councils. Whilst there are many which are representative and which perform a valuable function, in most areas there are few or no elections and related concerns about the representative function they exercise. SURF's focus is on currently disadvantaged communities. Community Councils tend to exist in more affluent areas where they frequently operate as protectors of the status quo. The task in disadvantaged areas is one of transformation. Some initiatives and investments in disadvantaged areas have resulted in the establishment of locally managed or owned 'anchor organisations'. These are well established service delivery vehicles with stable administrative and management systems, as well as some collateral in revenue and capital under some degree of community control. As such, they are capable of providing the physical base and entrepreneurial centre of wider action in participation and innovation.

The annual process of the SURF Awards for Best Practice in Community Regeneration regularly identifies and promotes numerous successful examples of such organisations. Much more could be done to build on their experience and capacities. A brief description of

the 2013 process and outcomes is available at this link to the SURF website:

www.scotregen.co.uk/surf-awards

For consultative rather than participative purposes, the use of IT referenda and telephone voting on some issues should be pursued further as a way of engaging people. The intended purpose of the consultation needs to be appropriate to the method and the resultant information should be seen to be used in a genuine process.

As is widely understood, the main reason for not participating currently in such exercises is the view that people's views don't really count. Constituents and service users are frequently consulted after the fact and/or left under-informed of any outcome from their participation. Rapidly developing systems of social media offer a means of efficient, cost effective and genuinely interactive consultation. They also offer the prospect of greater engagement in the democratic process by younger people whose concerns and needs are frequently omitted from more conventional methods. The same goes for elderly people and those with disabilities which limit access to public meetings and collective consultation processes.

In terms of more active participation, the ongoing substantial GoWell research programme has produced robust evidence that almost any form of active participation can significantly increase the sense of personal and community wellbeing. This then offers a constructive basis for building productive and appropriate interactions to mutual benefit.

<http://www.gowellonline.com/>

5. SCOTLAND'S FUTURE: *Has there been enough discussion about local democracy in the debate about Scotland's future? If not, what should be addressed and how might this be achieved?*

SURF's view is that there has not been enough debate about local democracy. Whilst many groups have some responsibility about inserting this important issue into the debate, the major role falls to Local Authorities and COSLA. If COSLA has the view that Local Authorities should have a major role in expanding local democratic accountability in the future, it should articulate clearly which services it would wish to take over and how local accountability could improve service delivery. The discussion cannot and should not happen in a vacuum. The public should be presented with a clear vision of the future which COSLA envisages for Local Authorities. It should also be enabled to meaningfully engage in assessing and commenting on the degree to which local democracy is essential in all of these services.

6. OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES: *Do you have any concerns about strengthening local democratic decision making in Scotland?*

SURF has expressed some concern at some aspects of national government policy which are focused on achieving economies of scale without obvious consideration of the resultant losses in local economies. There are similar concerns with the operational arrangements and centralising tendencies in some local authorities. As expressed above; SURF takes the view that an adequate consideration of the task and the intelligent allocation of appropriate levels of responsibility and resources would ultimately be more successful and cost effective for everyone.

On a related point, there are a number of agencies which have significant roles and responsibilities operating across Scotland and which do not operate under local democratic control. The COSLA document appears to suggest that the Local Government needs strengthened and awarded more powers. What is less clear is how this would necessarily strengthen local democratic decision making. In the absence of clarity as to how more powerful local authorities would lead to more participative local decision making, the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy is at risk of being seen as simply an attempt by local authorities to expand their powers. In that case, it will probably be less influential in the debate than it could otherwise be.

4 Conclusion

SURF would warmly welcome any reasonable opportunity to expand on and discuss any of the points above.

End of submission

**SURF Chair, Brian MacDonald &
SURF Chief Executive, Andy Milne
20.12.13**

For more information on SURF and its work, please visit www.scotregen.co.uk

SURF Scotland's Independent Regeneration Network, Orkney Street Enterprise Centre, 18-20 Orkney Street, Glasgow G5 1 2BX
Tel: 0141 585 6848 / Email: info@scotregen.co.uk / Website: www.scotregen.co.uk

Supported by: Aberdeen City Council, City of Edinburgh Council, Clyde Gateway, Creative Scotland, Dundee Partnership, Glasgow City Council, Glasgow Housing Association, Glasgow's Regeneration Agency, Highlands & Islands Enterprise, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, the Scottish Government, and Skills Development Scotland.

A not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. Registered in Scotland as 'Scotregen Ltd'. Company No. SC 154 598. Vat Reg. No. 735 2880 21.