



SUMMARY REPORT: SURF AWARDS WORKSHOP ON TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION (MAY 2014, EDINBURGH)

ABOUT THIS PAPER

Each year, SURF and the Scottish Government work together to identify, highlight and share learning from examples of excellence and innovation in regeneration processes in Scotland through the SURF Awards for Best Practice in Community Regeneration.

SURF Award winners are recognised in five categories, reflecting all aspects of scales of regeneration activity, from major infrastructure projects to local community group led initiatives. SURF convenes follow-up study visit and workshop events with the aim of drawing out transferable lessons that can be used to inform the development of similar projects operating in other contexts and geographies.

This paper presents a brief summary of one of these events, a workshop on Town Centre Regeneration featuring the SURF Award winning Stromness Townscape Heritage Initiative in Orkney. The event took place in the offices of Architecture + Design Scotland in Edinburgh on the morning of 27 May 2014.

SURF is grateful to: Architecture + Design Scotland for hosting this event and for sponsoring the Town Centre Regeneration category of the 2013 SURF Awards; and to the Scottish Government for their wider support of the SURF Awards process.



PRESENTATION: THE TOWN CENTRE CHALLENGE

Guest speaker: Diarmaid Lawlor, Head of Urbanism Architecture + Design Scotland

Following a welcome and introduction from SURF Chief Executive Andy Milne, Diarmaid Lawlor provided context for the workshop by highlighting new thinking around addressing the current challenges for effectively regenerating struggling town centres.

CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Three main systemic problems are broadly shared by all failing town centres in Scotland. These are:

1. **Lack of Accountability** – in many town centres, there is no clear ‘ownership’ of the responsibility for conceiving and delivering holistic improvements.
2. **Leverage and Misdirection** – unlocking capital investment for town centre projects is a considerable challenge; in some cases, scarce capital investment is misdirected into less appropriate responses, such as a new multi-million pound, over-sized and ultimately under-used cultural venue for a small town.
3. **Limited Sharing of Vision and Responsibilities** – local community groups and more generally middle class professional organisations often fail to communicate and cooperate effectively.

One example of these issues conspiring to “getting it wrong” are typical 1980s-format shopping centres in small and medium towns. They are often architecturally inward-looking, divorced from the town centre, and represent substantial sunk capital. A prohibitively expensive demolition and rebuilding job would be required for change. Typically, they do not provide any space for general use by local community groups.

On the other hand, some local success stories have emerged from a series of successful planning charrettes looking at new life for existing places over recent years. One such example in Kirkcaldy demonstrates how “a teenager who could change the whole town”: a local 15 year old successfully researched the feasibility of a process for greater positive action in, and cooperation between, young people in the community, including the setting up of a shared facility.

Another positive development in Kirkcaldy has been the increasing use of local arts and heritage to engender incremental social and economic regeneration. One creative instance is a successful social enterprise that links local history and assets by making jewellery from coal that is found washed up on the Firth of Forth shore.

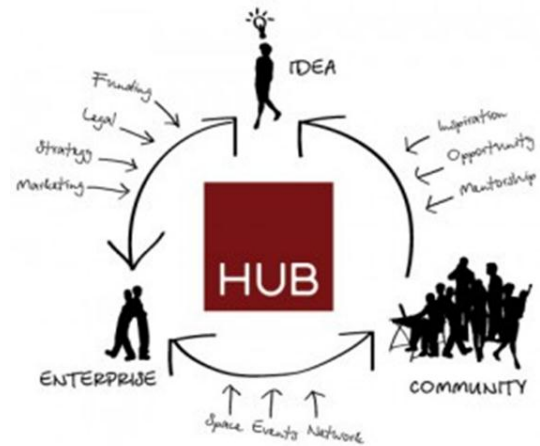
“The ‘Town Centre First’ principle tells the public sector that it needs to change its mentality and give more thought to whether relocating its assets really benefits the town.”

Architecture + Design Scotland and SURF were among the bodies whose senior representatives sat on the board of an independent External Advisory Group for the Scottish Government led [National Review of Town Centres](#) in 2013-14. One of the main recommendations that emerged from this Review was the ‘Town Centre First’ principle, which stated that local authorities should consider the health of town centres at the heart of local decision-making processes.

This broadly shared principle is intended to stem a growing trend in recent years for parts of the public sector electing to independently move important assets, such as offices and staff, out of town centres with the purpose of lowering departmental costs. This 'individualised' mentality prioritises short to medium term internal savings at the expense of a wider vision for a more inclusive, productive and efficient approach that takes into account the interconnected interests of the whole town.

Furthermore, the benefits of local authorities developing shared service centres in out-of-town locations are frequently overstated. For example, there is a lack of evidence that creating a shared facility for e.g. planning and social work departments results in any significant increase in collaboration.

Moving public sector assets out of the town centre is more likely to be ultimately economically detrimental. One example is presented by a secondary school in Campbeltown, which elected to relocate from the town centre to a bigger space outwith the town.



In addition to being further from – and therefore less accessible to – the community, the relatively remote location did not allow for mutually beneficial co-operation. The school had to develop a new library, swimming pool and football pitch in the new location, whereas it could have freely used and supported existing publicly owned facilities to serve those needs had it chosen to remain in the town.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Architecture + Design Scotland advise town centre stakeholders to work from four basic principles:

1. **Start Anywhere**
2. **Provoke Possibilities**
3. **Take Leadership**
4. **Expect Collaboration**

At the root of these principles is the establishment of conditions that effectively support the development of fresh local ideas and collaborative enterprises. One possible approach to this is the 'Community Hub' process, in which local authorities make use of resources such as vacant buildings to provide opportunities for community members to meet and potentially develop new enterprises (see diagram, above right).



Stirling used this approach to great effect through its 'Stirling City Lab' and 'Startup Street' initiatives. Stirling Council made a modest £36k investment to provide a popular mentoring and support programme to help local people to develop a business enterprise, event or project to be delivered in the city centre.

Just one of the outcomes of this investment was the creation of a 'Made in Stirling' shop (pictured on p3), which enables 20 local people to sell handmade artworks and clothes, providing a wide variety of economic opportunities from a previously vacant retail unit.

The public sector is understandably rationalising, but conventional unimaginative responses can be counterproductive. Despite the difficult economic climate, creative thinking can produce positive opportunities to develop new thinking and efficiencies based on appropriately diverse local approaches to revitalise Scotland's town centres.

PRESENTATION: EDINBURGH 12

Guest speaker: Craig Torrance, Senior Economic Development Officer, City of Edinburgh Council

Craig Torrance was invited to give a big city perspective on town centre regeneration.

The City of Edinburgh Council's 'Edinburgh 12' initiative was launched in 2013 with a view to speeding up the regeneration of strategically important gap sites in the city centre. The Council identified the 12 target areas based on their potential to be developed within five years.

It is anticipated that the successful outcome of development of the dozen sites highlighted in the map below, could deliver the following outcomes:

- A total gross domestic value of £2.14bn;
- Potential to support 28k jobs during construction, and 20k FTE jobs upon completion;
- 1.5m sq ft of Grade A office space, and 1.3m sq ft of retail and leisure space;
- 1650 residential units, and 1600 hotel bedrooms.



Caltongate
Donaldson's College
The Haymarket
King's Stable Road
Royal High School
St Andrew Square

Dewar Place
Fountainbridge
India Buildings
Quatermile
Shrubhill
St James Quarter

The Council are supporting the most efficient development of these sites through a centralised but flexible range of targeted services for developers, investors and agents involved in large-scale projects such as major mixed use developments in Caltongate, the St James Quarter, Haymarket and Quatermile.

These services are provided by a single point of contact in the Council's Business Partnerships Team, which takes the role of coordinating and facilitating discussions with all Council departments to simplify and accelerate progress.

The scale of the projects is considerable, but the improving economic climate has helped encourage new development. Effective collaboration with a wide range of partners including Network Rail and Scottish Canals have led to further possibilities in some of the sites.

In the context of the city's high international profile and tourist numbers, Edinburgh has a relatively weak place in the UK retail rankings. The 'Edinburgh 12' initiative is intended help to strengthen the city in this area while complementing Edinburgh's 'Strategy for Jobs'.

PRESENTATION: STROMNESS TOWNSCAPE HERITAGE INITIATIVE

Guest speaker: Miriam Frier, Strategic Project Officer, Orkney Islands Council

Stromness Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) was independently selected as the winning project in the 'Town Centre Regeneration' category of the 2013 SURF Awards. Project manager Miriam Frier was invited to provide an overview of the project and share her thoughts on what transferable lessons can be drawn from its development.

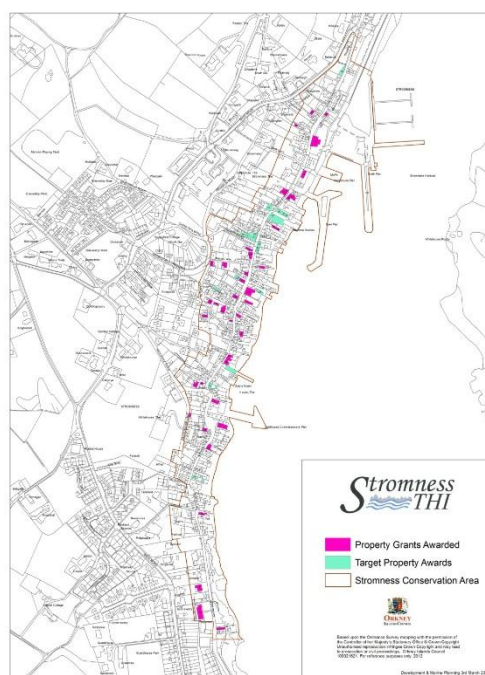
Stromness THI is a five-year heritage-based grant scheme designed to deliver sustainable improvements to the small town of Stromness in Orkney to help make it a better place to work, visit and live.

From 2009-14, the THI invested in over 60 grants in:

- Building repairs and street paving;
- Bringing vacant town centre spaces back into use;
- Restoring architectural detail;
- Training and skills initiatives;
- Boosting the town centre business, retail and tourist offer;
- Promoting local creative industries.

The location of the property grants is indicated in the pink areas of the map to the right.

The THI's total grant funding over the five years added up to £3.56m. This was sourced from eight funders including the Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic Scotland, Orkney Islands Council and the European Union's LEADER programme.



The THI's work resulted in a wide range of positive outcomes, such as success in attracting new business and residents into the town centre, a strong legacy in new educational and tourist opportunities, and bringing six long-vacant buildings back into use. The total project investment value, including public and private sector investment, was in excess of £6.5m.



Restoring local buildings: historic (left), pre-2009, and post-THI investment (right)

USEFUL LESSONS

The project did, however, face several challenges during its development. One was local dissatisfaction with the amount of time some town centre streets were inaccessible due to building works, and another was misinformed perceptions of favouritism in grant recipients.

One of the most important lessons the THI learned was that just because funding is available to a regeneration project, it is not always useful to take it, even in the current economic climate. The renovation of the town's historic Stromness Hotel building provides a case study example.

"It's not always a good idea to pursue funding just because it's available."

The THI received European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) resources towards the refurbishment of the former hotel building. The ERDF funding, however, came with strict rules on what the refurbished building can and can't be used for, and by whom. As a result of these restrictions it has proven difficult to find a 'suitable' tenant, and therefore the building is largely unoccupied.

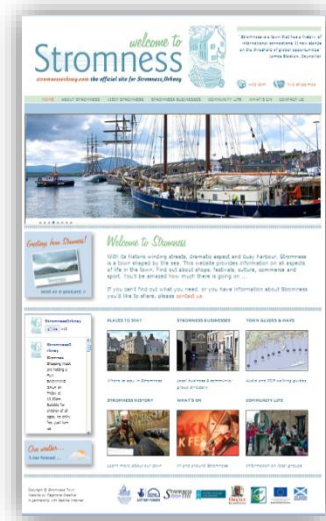
The original application form to ERDF highlighted the requirement for office space for the renewables industry, but for Orkney, the rate of development and maturity in this sector has been slower than expected and there is not the need as yet for office premises. The funding parameters are now set and cannot be reversed and so Orkney Islands Council is working hard to promote and let the space within the eligible parameters. The lessons learnt for the THI are that by seeking grant funding from certain quarters, there needs to be a greater awareness of the risks attached so that informed decisions can be made.

These problems were, however, modest in the context of the sweeping changes the project made to the town. Tourist numbers are up, skills training in areas such as construction is available locally for the first time, and with streetscape and public realm improvements there is a great enhancement in local pride of place.

What's next for the project? While the THI funding has now largely concluded, some of the project partners and wider community stakeholders are continuing to work together in areas such as investing in renewable energy, maintaining a '[Welcome to Stromness](#)' website (right), and constructing another civic building, which may potentially house some Orkney Islands Council staff relocated from the nearby capital, Kirkwall.

The lessons will also be used to inform a new THI for Kirkwall, which will be based on similar themes around investing in the built heritage, enhancing the town centre offer, and developing sustainable skills training programmes.

Throughout the Stromness THI process, there is recognition that a local authority can only act as a catalyst for change – it is local individuals that drive regeneration.



OPEN DISCUSSION

Following the presentations, the workshop featured a participative open conversation. This section highlights some of the views expressed in the main areas of discussion.

Active Citizens – too many town centre projects become unsustainable as they rely on too few people spinning many plates. Local capacity building processes that develop greater and more diverse participation in regeneration efforts should be a higher priority than is currently the case.

Beyond Core Business – the challenge of asking someone to come out of their core business in, for example, a local school and into discussions about town centre development is a significant one. While such people often have a genuine interest in meaningfully engaging with partners, they often lack the time and energy required.

Building Capacity – is needed not just within community groups, but also in local authorities and similar public bodies. Many Council officers and elected officials struggle to engage effectively with diverse communities and the concept of alternative perspectives on assets.

Cocktail Funding – the accumulation of short-term project resources from a 'cocktail' of different funding agencies is an unhelpful reality for many town centre initiatives. The time required to report monitoring and evaluation outcomes to various funders in differing formats, timescales *etc.* is onerous, wasteful and demotivating.

Community Planning – the misconception or mis-promotion of Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) as the appropriate route for community groups to engage in local regeneration processes continues to be obstructive. Many CPPs are effectively 'invisible' to the local community. The term 'Service Planning Partnerships' would better represent their important function as a forum for service providers to work closer together and find opportunities for cooperation and efficiency.

Corporate Approaches – the increasingly corporate-like nature of some local authorities leads some to question the main driver of public sector decision making – is it to reduce service delivery costs or to contribute to civic life? Moving public assets from the town centre may help the former in the short term but damage the latter. Austerity is not the same as best value.

Council Dependency – there is an apparent assumption in some Community Planning Partnerships that the Council is responsible for everything. There is a challenge in supporting a more outward looking approach that could help encourage partners such as health boards and skills agencies to contribute more resources and ideas to Community Planning processes.

Cultural Spaces – In many small towns, such as Rothesay in Bute, as a result of historical changes there are too many cultural spaces to serve current populations. Local authorities need to rationalise in some circumstances, but the process of doing so is difficult when iconic local buildings are involved. The ‘Town Centre First’ principle should help inform priority decision-making processes in this regard.

Delivery Vehicles – the funding entity driving a town centre project, whether a THI or another format, is less important. What matters more is that the entity is effective in opening authentic conversations and developing creative collaborations. Stromness THI’s success in this regard is clear. Speculative and opportunistic local conversations led to all sorts of positive outcomes, such as the use of a local quarry to provide paving stones and the development of an innovative “I-spy” heritage trail map by local schoolchildren.

Educational Facilities – are an often under-utilised resource for many actual and prospective town centre projects. There is an opportunity to broaden thinking about what our town centres can achieve through greater collaboration with primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions. Community demand for use of school/college town centre facilities can be considerable, especially in places such as east Kirkcaldy where some community groups lack a place to meet in the local neighbourhood.

Local Engagement – it is still challenging to make connections around civic planning and community participation. Some local authorities remain resistant to entering into a meaningful dialogue with local groups such as community councils. There are, however, some useful counter-examples, such as the City of Edinburgh Council’s productive engagement with Fountainbridge Community Group in one of the ‘Edinburgh 12’ developments.

Local Politicians – as representatives and channels of support are often vital in the conception and development processes towards town centre projects of all scales. One of the first actions Stromness THI took was to invite local Councillors on to a strategic partnership, so that they became engaged with the project’s decision-making processes from the start. Their contributions proved valuable.

New Buildings – are far from the only game in town. Our town centres already have lots of untapped potential for retrofitting regeneration processes. This approach often requires more creative thinking and open-minded collaboration. Some agencies appear to automatically prefer the establishment of new-build facilities. This may reflect a lack of knowledge or respect for existing local assets and a lack of imagination as to what they could be used for. In Brechin, for example, a new school is being built on the outskirts while some argue that seemingly adequate town centre buildings lie vacant.

Productive Momentum – can be built from one minor local success. Investing substantial time and energy in developing over-ambitious plans can be ultimately wasteful when smaller-scale

incremental growth may present a more valid strategy for progress. Architecture + Design Scotland hopes its 'Start Anywhere' principle will encourage more of the latter approach. The proposed regeneration of Girvan Swimming Pool in Ayrshire is an example of over-reach. The plans spiralled into an ambitious £14m development and some local support and momentum was lost when funding was not approved.

Transactions of Place – are made possible by the building of 'layers' in the town centre, such as attracting an educational institution, a major local employer and a cultural venue – an education layer, an employment layer, a cultural layer. The more layers there are, the more town centre use increases and the easier it is for the community to get things done.

What About Cities? – Policy-makers sometimes appear to have a confused view of cities as comprising either a number of town centres, or just one big city centre. The truth is they tend to have both. Many recognisable and often historic communities of place within city boundaries, such as Granton in Edinburgh, are not recognised as town centres by policy makers. This can mean they are disadvantaged in accessing funding sources that town centres external to the city are eligible for. City resources, on the other hand, tend to be invested in the commercial centre. In the current climate this can exacerbate existing economic and social inequalities within cities.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

(a-z by surname)

- Sharon Averbuch, Granton Improvement Society
- Andrea Cooke, Calton Barras Action Plan
- Susie Dibdin, Falkirk Townscape Heritage Initiative
- Ian Findlay, Ice Cream Architecture
- Miriam Frier, Stromness Townscape Heritage Initiative
- Derek Harper, BRAVO Brechin
- Deryck Irving, Greenspace Scotland
- Diarmaid Lawlor, Architecture + Design Scotland
- Dr John McCarthy, Heriot Watt University
- Brian MacDonald, SURF
- Ross McEwan, Granton Improvement Society
- Russell McLarty, Chance to Thrive
- Andy Milne, SURF
- Deborah Peel, University of Dundee
- Derek Rankine, SURF
- Jacqueline Telford, Central Govan Action Plan
- Kevin Toner, Architect
- Craig Torrance, City of Edinburgh Council
- Mark Watson, Historic Scotland

ABOUT THE SURF AWARDS

SURF's annual awards process, delivered in partnership with the Scottish Government, is open to all regeneration initiatives in Scotland that are currently in place or that have been completed within two years of the closing date.

The purpose of the SURF Awards is:

- To recognise and reward best practice and innovation in community regeneration;
- To promote and disseminate best practice across Scotland as means of sharing knowledge and experience, and thereby enhancing future policy and practice;
- To highlight the role that regeneration projects have in improving the wellbeing of individuals and communities.

The SURF Awards offers an opportunity for regeneration projects of all sizes to demonstrate value to funders and partners, support team building and develop a national profile.

Further information on the SURF Awards, including overviews of over 100 winning and shortlisted projects in recent years, is available on our website:

<http://www.scotregen.co.uk/surf-awards>

End of report

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