



Scottish Urban  
Regeneration Forum

SURF : sharing experience : shaping practice

# *NO SMALL MATTER*



**A SURF SEMINAR ON SMALL TOWN REGENERATION  
COSLA CONFERENCE CENTRE, EDINBURGH – 15.05.07**

## **Event Summary and main outcomes**

SURF Vice Chair Colin Armstrong welcomed over 60 delegates from Orkney to Dumfries who gathered in Edinburgh on May 15<sup>th</sup> to the SURF Small Town Regeneration seminar- 'No Small Matter'. The title refers to the fact that 30% of the Scottish population live in small towns (up to 20K population.). Much of the Scottish community regeneration debate, policy and resource allocation of recent years has been focused on the cities and their surrounding areas of concentrated disadvantage. To help stimulate some more debate on this issue SURF ran a series of articles in the 2004/5 issues of its Scotregen journal on the particular challenges for Scotland's small towns. Towards the end of 2006, Scottish Borders Council, on behalf of the South of Scotland Alliance, and in co-operation with CoSLA, produced a substantial report calling for dedicated policy and resource support for Scotland's small towns. In its role as the independent forum for regeneration policy and practice in Scotland, SURF convened the 'No Small Matter' seminar to explore this important issue further.

**The purpose of the ‘No Small Matter’ seminar was:**

- To learn more of new approaches for supporting small town regeneration in differing contexts.
- To highlight the potential for linking local skills, knowledge and expertise in an invigorated local Community Planning approach.
- To consider specific funding proposals to the development of small towns as models of sustainability.
- To consider the case for more vigorous local democracy through community specific social, economic and environmental ‘health-checks’
- To inform policy and resources considerations for regenerating Scotland’s small towns.
- To help re-engage national regeneration organisations and strategies with local communities.

The programme was designed provide learning from different approaches and to use the wide range of expertise from the delegates attending to bring out some useful proposals for improving future policy and priority based resource allocation.

**The three introductory key speakers were:**

- **Ian Lindley**, Director of Planning and Economic Development at Scottish Borders Council. Ian started proceedings by outlining the history of the production on the 2005 Scottish Small Towns report and some proposals for ‘whole town health checks’ and a dedicated catalytic funding mechanism to encourage action through effective local partnership. He also noted the consistency of the issues and opportunities in respect of small town regeneration in England and Europe, as well as across urban and rural Scotland.
- **Kirsten Francis**, the Market Towns and Services Special Advisor at the successful ‘One North East’ English Regional Development Agency, illustrated the information based approach of their Market Towns Strategy. It is designed to support ‘distinctive development’, rather than growth at the expense of identity.
- **Brian MacDonald**, Regeneration Director at the new Irvine Bay Urban Regeneration Company was the final key speaker. Brian described the new URC’s plans for building on the history and potential of the five small towns within its area and how these fitted within a unified strategy.

Ian, Brian and Kirsten were then joined on a ‘policy and practice’ panel by representatives of the main government agencies which have specific roles in supporting regeneration across Scotland.

These were:

<b>Laura McIvor</b>	Branch Head, Scottish Executive
<b>Euan Dobson</b>	Regeneration Manager, Scottish Enterprise National
<b>Ian Mitchell</b>	Director of Regeneration at Communities Scotland
<b>Jon Harris</b>	Director of Strategy at CoSLA

## COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

In the course of the policy panel questions and comments a number of points were made including the following:

### **Small Town report – where are we now in terms of progress on this?**

Ian Lindley noted the presently fluid political situation, but added that his discussions with the previous administration were encouraging and he continues to see cause for optimism about support for re-looking at policies and resources for small town regeneration. He expressed the view that there are significant opportunities to progress towards some coherent action.

Other panel members expressed interest in the issues raised in the report, particularly in relation to community involvement, but they also noted that the new administration was yet to consider or take a view on how to proceed.

### **The right focus**

There was some discussion as to whether the focus should be specifically small towns. Some argued that proper consideration of place provides a more practical focus. They felt that the distinctiveness of place helps in securing meaningful local engagement within appropriate structures to meet relevant aims within locally specific circumstances and needs. The successes of HIE in this place and culture based approach was noted.

### **Institutional complexity**

Some community activists noted that the apparent complexity of institutional structures and related bodies was unhelpful for local groups trying to find advice, partnership and practical support.

### **Private partners**

It was generally agreed that supporting local small private sector services and commercial initiatives was vital in creating local vibrancy and confidence. Local chambers of commerce and small business federations need to be linked into local plans and strategies; but in the right place to compliment their appropriate roles and interests.

### **Leading roles**

The need for good quality local leadership to build trust and co-operation is an essential element of any partnership approach. The role of local activists as well as elected councillors should be respected.

### **Local models**

Development Trusts and locally based housing associations offer good opportunities for building local community capacity and ownership of assets and processes.

### **Local services**

Good quality local services are core to maintaining and developing successful and sustainable communities.

### **Design and sustainability**

The quality of design is an important consideration both in terms of creating a sense of confidence and in terms of physical sustainability

### **Changing climate**

More consideration needs to be given to the opportunities and challenges that climate change presents for local development.

### **Spreading the jam**

Some members of the audience queried whether the mooted figure of £90M for a catalytic, target based, Small Town partnership fund was sufficient. Others argued that such resources as are available should be directed to practical initiatives rather than central planning structures. There was some discussion as to whether the formal Community Planning process under local authority leadership was the right vehicle for encouraging community entrepreneurship and action.

### **A cultured approach**

The relevance to the debate of the more creative ‘Cultural Planning’ approach was noted and participants were encouraged to look at the ‘Culture at the Centre’ report produced by the National Cultural Planning Steering Group which is available on the NCPSG web site at

[http://www.ncpsg.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=5&Itemid=12](http://www.ncpsg.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5&Itemid=12)

<b>DISCUSSION GROUP FEEDBACK</b>
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Delegates, in small, facilitated discussion groups were asked to reflect on the discussion so far in the context of their own knowledge and experience. Each group then agreed 3 points or recommendations for successful small town regeneration to feed back to the final plenary session.

These included the following:

### **Funding and Sustainability**

- We must try to agree sustainable structures and processes matched with appropriate support.
- It’s not just about resources, but also prioritisation of points for action.
- A dedicated (risky, kick start) fund of £200M allocated within a 5-10 year target driven programme should be considered
- Sustainability needs to be viewed on a very long term basis

### **Partnership**

- More trust across agencies, and between agencies and communities, is essential.
- In Community Planning, Local Authorities should act as facilitators and make space for others to deliver.
- Informed realism in what can be achieved is also an important basis of building trust.
- Particular investment in Community Planning regeneration structures is needed to engage the private sector.

### **Models**

- The internal knowledge based market town model is one to follow.
- More objective consideration of what the effective local delivery vehicles are - if not Community Planning.

### **Community Involvement**

- More investment in research to provide communities with real information for well informed key priority decisions can support trust, co-operation and involvement.
- There is some concern regarding a lack of aspiration and motivation from some communities.
- We need to find new ways of working at a local level in terms of politics and community involvement.

- Community Planning is not the only vehicle for community involvement and improving service delivery.
- Issue based and action centred community engagement is central to success.

### **Learning**

- A best practice tool kit for developing local policy in small town regeneration would be helpful.
- One size does not fit all.
- Learning and training needs to be based on failure as well as success.

**Added audience point** – Consideration of the challenges and opportunities presented by climate change is a vital issue and a useful driver of collective action.

## **SUMMARY AND FOLLOW UP**

In conclusion it was noted that the event had been a useful and timely opportunity to review the case for a more focused approach to supporting the vital role of small towns. In following through on this debate:

- The Small Towns Task group will continue to lobby its case for distinct policy consideration and dedicated resources for regenerating small towns.
- The National Cultural Planning Steering group will be following through on its work in support of using local culture assets and knowledge to help create locally relevant community regeneration strategies at all levels.
- SURF will use the information, comments and proposals from this event to help inform discussions towards better regeneration policy for communities across Scotland.
- CoSLA, the Scottish Executive and its agencies will continue to develop their thinking and responses to the varied challenges of supporting successful and sustainable regeneration.

Copies of the key speakers’ presentations are available from the ‘Knowledge Centre’ section of the SURF web site at [www.scotregen.co.uk](http://www.scotregen.co.uk)

No Small Matter – regenerating Scotland’s small towns  
A Scottish Urban Regeneration Forum report 21.05.07

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**Andy Milne – SURF Chief Executive 21.5.07**

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