

SURF 2026 MANIFESTO STAGE 1 OUTCOMES

February 2025

OVERVIEW

i The views and expertise in the SURF network are being used to provide a bold and practical set of policy proposals for improving policy and practice in place-based regeneration. These proposals will be presented to the political parties competing to form the next Scottish Government at the 2026 Scottish Parliament elections through a 2026 SURF Manifesto for Community Regeneration.

In the first phase of development, SURF's Chief Executive and Policy Manager held meetings with representatives of 25 SURF member bodies from a diverse range of sectors and geographies, to learn more about their current situations, and what policy changes they wish to see in future. This briefing provides key outcomes from interviews with SURF members engaged with community led regeneration. The interviews took place between September and January 2025 and are explored through the SURF Award themes.

In subsequent phases of development, SURF would like to understand the extent to which suggestions and experiences gathered from these engagements with SURF members resonate more widely, and if they are subject to division and disagreement. There will also be an open discussion to allow other ideas and topics on the given theme to be raised. For more background information, visit: <https://surf.scot/policy/>

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COMMUNITY LED REGENERATION

1. Long-Term Funding

The main issue reported in SURF member discussions, by some distance, concerned the provision of funding for community led regeneration activity.

Several SURF members said annual funding pressures have always been commonplace in community led regeneration, but the 2024/25 year was worse than ever. The funding landscape was seen as having reached a crisis point, and an existential threat for many long-standing community organisations.

Some of the SURF members consulted were terminating or reducing services, issuing redundancy notices, and working with their Boards on crisis management processes. The reduction, closing and pausing of some funding programmes was seen by some as creating the crisis. Others pointed to a longer gestation period stemming from core funders continually asking investees to do more with less each year, leading to a point of unsustainability.

Funders' preferences for providing short-term project funding over stable core funding was also cited as a factor behind the current crisis period. SURF members agreed that the Fair Funding campaign led by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, with asks including long-term support of three years or more, and flexible core funding, should be adopted by the Scottish Government.

2. Community Empowerment

SURF members that engage with community led regeneration expressed general dissatisfaction with policy implementation on community empowerment.

Well-intentioned policy aspirations are perceived as not delivering in practice. Examples include: tokenistic approaches to community engagement processes in some public and private sector led regeneration plans; some public bodies not engaging with community organisations, despite being obliged to do by legislative processes like asset transfer requests; and a decline in community development support functions leading to a reduction in capacity for community led decision-making. This contradicts clear policy aspirations about seeking to build community empowerment.

Recent consultations, including Democracy Matters Phase Two, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act Review, and the Independent Review of Community Learning and Development, were criticised for absorbing a lot of time and energy from the community sector, without delivering – or delivering enough – in the way of positive actions.

SURF members singled out the Democracy Matters consultation. They felt that a widespread support for greater community decision-making in Scotland was clearly demonstrated across the many local events and formal contributions that have been made across multiple engagement phases. Meaningful responsive actions have, however, been perceived as being continually pushed back for the next term of Parliament to deal with, since its announcement in late 2017.

While some SURF members accept that furthering community empowerment involves a great deal of complexity, and a major investment of resources, there was a consensus that the next Scottish Government should take steps to follow through on demand for change without any further rounds of consultation.

3. Diluted Portfolios and Political Churn

Some SURF members felt community led regeneration is suffering because of a general landscape of change and disruption in national and local government.

A shifting policy environment, with new duties and opportunities including Local Place Plans, which some community groups are struggling to find the time to learn about and engage with, was one challenge.

Another was the loss of personnel and the changing of departmental structures, remits and job titles in local government. Several community groups said they had built up a relationship with a helpful, knowledgeable and experienced key contact in local government, which had disappeared abruptly.

Some SURF members also said it was becoming less clear who is campaigning for more effective community led regeneration at Scottish Government level, with some aspects divided across multiple Ministerial portfolios.

A new government should look at this issue, and do more to ensure community groups are clearer about the key policies and processes that can help them, and clear lines of contact and responsibility in public sector partners.

4. Declining Mental Health

A number of SURF members working or volunteering at the front-line in community organisations, said that they and their colleagues were coming into contact more frequently with service users with mental health challenges. They perceived a significant rise in this over the past five years, and reported some difficult incidents, such as threats of violence, becoming more common.

The main concern is that staff and volunteers in non-health related community bodies are not equipped to provide the mental health support that people might need, but are keen to, if not obliged to, support people that are seeking their help. Reducing pressures on the health service, and providing local support structures with effective referral processes for people in poor mental health, was seen as the most effective way of dealing with this.

IMPROVING SCOTLAND'S PLACES

1. Capital Project Funding

Taking a holistic approach to improving places with social and economic challenges requires major investment. Regeneration project funding programmes will always be a main driver of partnership led action.

SURF members working in local government, and for other regeneration players including development trusts, said project funding had become harder to access. Examples were given of capital funding streams that had been reduced or paused, leading to a piling up of “shovel ready” projects that communities and delivery vehicles were keen and ready to make happen, but unable to access resources to proceed with.

The restricted finances in the public sector, and pressures to prioritise statutory service delivery, led to pessimistic outlooks that the situation would change in the near future. SURF consultees, however, pointed to strong residents' demands for regeneration investment activity in their areas, and felt political will could and should be developed to restore access to funding.

SURF members were keen to make clear, that adequate operational budgets are needed to deliver and maintain capital projects and investments.

2. Community Wealth Building

SURF members are generally enthusiastic about the prospects for Community Wealth Building principles to deliver meaningful change for fragile local economies across Scotland. The Scottish Government's backing for the concept has been welcomed, as has the rolling out of pilot activity in some local government regions.

Concerns were expressed, however, that the policy appetite appears to be moving on, before pilot activity can be reviewed, developed and scaled up.

Some members also reported feeling that public bodies are strong on words, but short on action, when it comes to putting principles into practice, including creating more employee owned businesses, reconfiguring local supply chains, and improving the supply of secure, fair-pay jobs.

The long-term nature of implementing Community Wealth Building was pointed to in SURF's consultations, and members called on all parties to commit to making it work across political cycles.

3. Climate Change

In general, SURF members felt not enough action is being taken to mitigate against, and adapt our places to, climate change impacts.

Speeding up aspirations to refurbish and retrofit older housing and civic buildings for better energy efficiency was seen as a central component of an appropriate action plan the next Scottish Government could take to address this concern.

Investment in skills and infrastructure to capitalise on opportunities for green jobs, was identified as a route to meeting climate change targets while also improving economic opportunities for places with regeneration demands.

Anxieties were shared that changing weather patterns, and specifically the raised threats of flooding and storm damage in already disadvantaged places, could be catastrophic, unless the political buy-in is secured to improve defence mechanisms and maintenance arrangements.

SURF members also pointed to community growing spaces, green spaces and circular economy amenities, including tool libraries and household item refurbishment workshops, as an important part of the mix.

An increase in dedicated funding for new project activity across all of these spheres will help make more of these initiatives take root and help protect Scottish places from future climate-related impacts.

4. High Streets

The continued decline of high streets and town centres in Scottish settlements was another concern for SURF members.

With cost of living pressures on consumers, and inflationary and tax challenges for local businesses, the death of the high street was seen as being likely to continue without fresh interventions and investment.

A multi-pronged approach was seen as being the only solution to tangible improvement. These included: bringing derelict and vacant high street buildings back into use as homes, community hubs, cultural centres, social enterprises and workspaces; improving capacity building support from public agencies for local businesses, community groups and charities; investing in shopfront improvement programmes; improving active travel, public transport and car parking infrastructure; and scaling up community led tourism activity to boost heritage attractions and profile.

CREATIVE REGENERATION

1. Sustainable Funding

The key policy challenge for SURF members that engage with culture led approaches to place-based regeneration concerned a lack of funding.

Specifically, community arts bodies that are delivering change in their communities, and their partner organisations, struggle to maintain core funding.

Many rely on insecure short-term project work to maintain staff and services, and are affected by wider challenges for the creative industries, with inflationary pressures affecting both the cost of doing business, and the ability of residents in poorer communities to spend their income on local leisure activity. Efficiency savings and reductions in long-term grant support add to an already challenging context.

SURF members engaged in their area felt their contributions to local economies, and to wider cultural, heritage and tourism ambitions, are under-appreciated in funding decision-making processes. Protecting, enhancing and widening Creative Scotland's multi-year funding model is one action policy-makers could take to improve this situation in the 2026-2031 term of Parliament.

2. Social Prescribing

SURF members are positive about the social prescribing model, in which the NHS and other players signpost service users to local community groups and activities that align with their interests.

The model can deliver significant long-term improvements for health and wellbeing, reduce isolation, and build social capital. While social prescribing is sometimes associated with sport and exercise, participation in all forms of cultural activity can deliver wider and more sustainable responses to social and economic problems in urban and rural Scotland.

Creative organisations in the SURF network were, however, generally unaware of any social prescribing processes happening in their communities. They felt this should be among the priorities for a new Scottish Government.

The practical nature of the model, and the capacity of many community arts bodies to incorporate additional local people into their activities programme, could make this a low-cost but high impact policy approach. The passion and experience that staff have towards enriching lives through arts participation can help reduce pressures on other areas of the public sector, including health.

A linked point is that other public institutions could learn from primary schools, which are notable for promoting art-based activity and engagement, and the benefits that flow from them.

3. Invisible Barriers

SURF Manifesto consultees highlighted the 'invisible barriers' that prevent or discourage people in poorer communities to visit and engage with key cultural institutions including museums and galleries.

A mix of deep-rooted causes include poverty, class, geographic distance, a lack of exposure in childhood, and limited outreach activity from institutions to deprived places.

SURF members felt these barriers are not being adequately identified or tackled amid other priorities and limited resources around cultural and regeneration policy.

Cultural venues that do not reach those in their city, town or regional catchment areas on low incomes, will only be able to deliver a fraction of their potential impact for people and places.

HOUSING AND REGENERATION

1. Affordable Housing

SURF members in the housing sector drew attention to the various housing emergencies declared by local and national government across Scotland. Rising instances of poverty, debt and homelessness, caused by rising rents, house prices and maintenance costs, was identified as a major driver of degeneration across many Scottish communities in the current context.

The fundamental relationship between housing, people and places was made clear, with a number of SURF members arguing that any regeneration investment should start with ensuring people can afford to live in comfortable homes. The value of the 'housing first' approach, which provides people with multiple needs with settled housing accommodation before looking at their other challenges, was also raised.

The creation of more affordable homes was seen as an urgent regeneration policy priority. Some saw new-build social housing investment programmes as a key part of the solution, while others pointed to the potential of scaling up the work of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership in converting vacant retail, office, civic and religious buildings in towns and cities into housing.

Others felt rent control mechanisms should be a primary way of relieving pressure, or that private developers could be incentivised to deliver new or existing housing targeted at those on low incomes. Some SURF members expressed concern about gentrification dangers in some areas, forcing out longer term residents as housing costs rise sharply, and about the rise in single occupation households, which increased pressures on existing stock.

2. Retrofitting for Energy Efficiency

SURF members also felt that although the business case for retrofitting older homes with energy efficiency measures is widely seen as an effective investment of public resources to reduce fuel poverty and carbon emissions, and improve health, not enough action is happening in practice.

Private rental tenants in areas with deprivation challenges, were seen by some consultees as the main target group being overlooked in current provision of grants, support and advice. The next Scottish Government could review arrangements for this group with a view to closing gaps and delivering progress.

The financial and practical barriers of refurbishment are not to be understated, especially when owners are uncooperative and tenants are unaware of opportunities, and/or there is a requirement for people to move out while works are undertaken. SURF members felt these challenges had to be met head on, as people and communities in need cannot be left behind on retrofitting by a Scottish Government committed to reducing poverty and poor health, and delivering on climate change aspirations.

SURF members also saw major opportunities for sustainable economic development, skills training and community wealth building, that can be derived from investments in capital projects, energy schemes and building maintenance plans that protect poorer communities against home energy inefficiency. A first step could involve looking at case studies of effective interventions that have been made in some multiply deprived communities in recent years, and replicating these approaches across the country.

EMPLOYABILITY

1. Improve Contract and Funding Provision

In employability, the biggest priority for SURF members concerned the provision of funding and contracts to deliver services intended to help people into work, training, volunteering and education. Messages included:

- Poor communications, delays, short windows in which to prepare contract bids and teething issues make it difficult to operate an effective and sustainable employability initiative in the longer term.
- 12 month contracts and year-to-year funding instability lead to poor project stability, high staff turnover and an inability to build on success.
- Front-line delivery pressures are compounded by complex compliance and reporting arrangements, which vary widely from one funding provider to another.

As some general funding programmes, such as those targeted at improving communities or health, can be more flexible and longer term, some employability organisations have been successfully applying for these resources. A downside was evident in creating more competition with other sectors.

An effective policy response would provide clear contract bidding processes in employability, long-term funding, alignment of reporting arrangements, and a more open and trusting relationship between funders and investees.

2. Address Additional Barriers, Fragile Economies

In the past five years, some contextual factors have become more challenging, and are making it more difficult for employability service providers to meet their objectives. These include:

- A perceived rise in mental health problems, drug and alcohol misuse, and poor social skills, are evident among people being referred to employability programmes from local authorities and charities.
- Particular pressures in different Scottish regions – affordable housing, childcare provision, transport and rural depopulation were cited most frequently – also inhibit employability service providers from providing practical support.
- Inflationary and cost of living pressures on consumers, and gloomy economic forecasts, also make it particularly challenging for some employability bodies to find opportunities with local employers.
- Pressures on public finances and voluntary sector funding, also depress recruitment and workplace training opportunities.

In general, employability staff are facing higher demands on their time and energy, much of which is directed to these additional barriers and economic pressures. These extra demands tend not to be met by additional resources.

A policy response to address the above issues will of course be highly challenging for policy-makers, but SURF members saw value in doing more to create tailored local employability partnership programmes, which seek to deal with multiple problems at once.

One practical suggestion provided, was to improve buy-in to the Local Employability Partnership approach, which some saw as lacking in outreach beyond government agencies and colleges, with limited involvement from service users, and from actors in the voluntary and private sectors.

Several SURF members identified Community Wealth Building as a route to building more sustainable employment opportunities in the longer term.

3. Disengagement from Education

Some SURF members are concerned that disengagement from secondary school education is becoming endemic in many communities. There are concerns that in a significant proportion of our secondary schools, a proportion of pupils stop attending, and their families are unresponsive when the school contacts them.

This is viewed as having become a more frequent occurrence in the post-Covid era, with negative long-term implications for pupils' life opportunities, and for local communities and economies.

The piloting, resourcing and scaling up of dedicated employability programmes that work with these pupils, was seen as a priority policy ask. The current policy focus on child poverty may help such approaches.

4. Use of Community Anchors

Some SURF members would like to see. While employability service providers in local government and the private sector, and large national charities, are active in providing effective employability support.